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The Fortunate Ones: Stories

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THE FORTUNATE ONES: STORIES

by
Mary Marge Locker

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT
MARY MARGE LOCKER: The Fortunate Ones: Stories
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

This thesis is a book-length collection of stories written and revised in the past two years. These stories revolve around specific themes of privilege and abuse. It is a work of fiction.

With great thanks for the wisdom and generosity of my mother, my sisters, Jimmy Cajoleas, Tom Franklin, Megan Abbott, Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth, John McElwee, John Warner, James Pogue, and Jane Rule Burdine.

Introduction

In these ten stories, I have approached consistent themes from a variety of narrative and stylistic angles. My aim throughout the creation and revision of these stories has been to portray elements of the world in which we live that are usually either overlooked or blown out of proportion. These themes are privilege/entitlement, abuse/predation, and the isolated “secret self.” I wanted to display these themes as being unavoidable in any person’s life, whether privileged outright as in “We Did These Things Together” or abused outright as in “A Child Again” or isolated outright as in “Spoils.”

Not every story incorporates all of these themes, but most do. The best embodiments of all three themes are “Spoils” and “School Night” and “Lolei.” In this introduction, I will discuss how each story contributes to the collection as a complete work, how the themes function directly within them, and some of my influences and ideas along the way.

“Spoils” exemplifies the message of the entire collection, and that is why it comes first. Obviously Beatrice suffers as the boys abuse their privilege and break apart her own secret world. Though she wants to break out of her isolation into the world-at-large, it happens in a way that destroys more than just her loneliness. I wanted the story to incorporate mystical elements but remain rooted in the real world. I think it is a realistic portrayal of entitlement and coming-of-age. Obviously there is a lot of sexual awakening in this collection, but I like Terrence and Dexter as different

depictions of that awakening. Terrence has just recently hit puberty, and he views sexuality as what will define him, yet Dexter is a few years past it, viewing Beatrice as a resource, neither as a human being nor as a mystic embodiment of sex the way the younger boys perceive her.

“Hopeful Green Stuff Woven” is a story about wanting to get away from privilege—the narrator, Nadine, attempts to sacrifice materialism and join a back-to-basics commune in the Pacific Northwest. She has a complex backstory, because she first left her cushy lifestyle in a planned community with a rich husband and moved to a chicken farm, and then she abandoned the chicken farm because she wants to contribute to the world in a different, and supposedly more authentic, way. The contradiction here is the self-centeredness of the people she joins in the commune. They all remain entitled, despite all the respective materialism and success they have shrugged off. The secret self is evident in Nadine’s bouts with loneliness and anxiety, as she attempts to acclimate to the entitlement and exclusivity of the group. It is also evident in other characters, like the man Kent who comes faithfully every weekend to try and convince his wife to come back to their life and their daughter, or in the teenage commune member Angeline, who barely speaks English and is manipulated into her role as a muse. Overall, this story combines two major themes while providing a commentary on the self-satisfaction of many who pursue the artistic “lifestyle” today, as well as women who leave all their duties (disguised as burdens and materialism) behind them to venture off on some *Eat, Pray, Love*-esque journey.

In “School Night” we have another sexual coming-of-age. Joanie’s greatest fears come to life on this night, and though she is relieved not to have died or to have

witnessed a murder, she is scared and disgusted by the facts of life that the night might have confirmed. She's clearly the child of wealthy parents in a great neighborhood, by all means privileged, but no spoiled brat. This is a story about abuse, and how it affects its witnesses. Joanie's secret self is shown only at the end of the story, in a reflection on something she learned from her classmate and how she felt when she learned it. That same feeling can easily be projected, and magnified, in relation to what happens to Deb and her on this one night. Deb's secret self is also very intensely guarded, and it is not stated clearly what has happened to her. Joanie is not a victim outright, but she suffers tremendously with new knowledge that she is scared to either share or confirm.

"Lolei" has an allegorical quality, condemning the savior complex that can often accompany privilege. Dooley is a lifelong rich kid, smart and unfriendly and entitled to his girlfriend, his cash, and his privacy. When that is disrupted at home, he escapes from his problems under the guise of wanting to help orphan children and wanting to make the world a better place. Obviously this doesn't go according to plan. Though what happens in Cambodia is not supposed to be any kind of divine retribution or condemnation, it is a warning against ever being able to predict how things will go. Part of Dooley really is a good man with his heart in the right place, but his good deeds do not go unpunished. The secret self here is not so much Dooley's secret financial situation, but rather Alta's appreciation and understanding of something greater than herself, something Dooley envies and hates. Cambodia also has a secret side, its dark underbelly of sex tourism and child abuse, and Dooley's

expectations of a world full of cute brown children to whom he can teach English is shattered, not just by his own horrifying experiences, but by the country as a whole.

“We Did These Things Together” also condemns entitlement. Bad things also happen to the characters. As opposed to “Lolei,” however, they bring the bad things upon themselves. Hyper-masculinity, misogyny, and pressure to live up to the family name are evident in each of the characters, particularly Curtis and Wells. This story combines privilege and abuse into an obvious abuse of privilege, a feeling that these boys are entitled not only to money and good jobs and probably some esteemed political connections, but also to invincibility. They are, of course, not invincible, and their own stupidity and attempts to be more like men (probably their fathers) are what condemn them. Blaise also embodies the idea of the secret self, his secret hate for Brown when he attends school there, and then his secret desire to go back to Brown, if simply as a means of separating himself from this intense family bond and the pressures and expectations that come with it. This story alternates between very specific and very abstract descriptions, which I think reflects Blaise’s seesawing opinions of his new lifestyle and what he will have to do to maintain it.

The shortest story, “In the Auditorium,” is similar in some ways to “We Did These Things Together.” Yet instead of using privilege and intoxicants to claim what is theirs, the boys of this story use privilege and intoxication to enjoy something that is not theirs to enjoy. They do it out of joy and emotion, though, not out of an attempt to impress anyone. But they do claim their own stakes in the experience, hijacking the Mormon Tabernacle Choir of its actual meaning and giving it a new one. All of their secret selves are on display, emotionally vulnerable not just to each other but to

everyone else present at the event. It is a story of being overwhelmed by beauty when one might think he is impervious to it.

“The Favorite” is a family drama, which on one level tells a ghost story, debating dream versus reality, and on another level weighs misunderstanding and competition among sisters. Even though Molly, our very privileged narrator, is clearly the parents’ favorite, she is immensely jealous of her dead sister, who was immensely jealous of how the other sisters were accepted by society and their family. The oldest sister, Esther, believes she should be the favorite, and feels confident that anyone worth her consideration would see clearly enough to love her best. The dynamics of this jealousy are confusing when explained straightforwardly like this, but I think each sister’s own perceptions are indicative of her own secret self and her deep wish to mean something to someone else. Molly narrates the life of her sister through the lens of the stories of her ex-boyfriends, which can be read as a selfish way of also telling her own story, or as an attempt to claim some kind of familiarity with her sister, in the only way she knows how. The abuse present in this story is neglect, as each character disregards each other character’s needs. “The Favorite” might seem like the most fantastic story in this collection, but it is really more about attempts toward reconciliation and forgiveness in a family than it is about its ghost.

Fitz, the protagonist of “Catfish Mystique” is a voyeur. As he and his wife have fallen further away from another in the eleven years of their marriage, he has drifted toward an imagined relationship with a high school girl. While this story may seem to be about Fitz’s voyeurism, and his ultimate opportunity to harm the teenagers, it is just as much a story about his relationship with his wife. He feels

entitled to her, and she feels entitled to a life where she doesn't have to work, a life free of Fitz's influence but supported by his job. Cece is the one who doesn't love Fitz, more so than vice versa. They have intensely secret lives and exist parallel to one another, a relationship that is not abusive so much as it is simply deprived of meaning and love.

“Worried Now, Won't Be Worried Long” harkens back to the sexual awakenings in the early stories “Spoils” and “School Night.” Like Beatrice and Joanie, Olivia is unsure what she's been brought into in her relationship with her therapist. But unlike Beatrice and Joanie, Olivia plays an active role in manipulating the circumstances that bring about this relationship, as well as manipulating the facts of it when she is scared that her mother might find out. Both Olivia and her mother are empowered, open-minded women, and together they are a twin-vision of a certain recklessness and fear of solitude. They both have secret selves, of course, but prefer to seem as if they are one and the same. This story really embodies all three of the collection's main themes. The women fall from privilege, only to have Olivia fall into a relationship that she thinks she can control—but what fifteen year old can really control the intentions of a man in authority? It is a story about sexual awakening, but more than that it is a story about awakening to reality, of which sexuality is only one small part. Understanding relationships, commitments, and what one must do to maintain one's lifestyle are also things Olivia learns. She is a clever character, but she is not as clever and well adjusted as she might think.

“A Child Again” really culminates the threads in other stories of minor abuse into a story of outright abuse with long-lasting and dire effects. This story is about the

narrator attempting to recover from what haunts her—both the abuse she suffered and her own mistaken attempt at escaping its effects—and not knowing how to do it. She finds refuge in Sig, who seems nice enough but isn't really asking to be anybody's special friend or keeper. The refuge he provides, and the connection between them, might not be as deep as Antonia or as a reader would want it to be, but Sig is hopefully only a stepping-stone toward real recovery after the story ends. Sig is a representation not just of privilege and status, but also of being untouchable. His demons are either nonexistent or have been destroyed by time and resources. The narrator's desire to embody the story's title, reverting back to her youth, contrasts directly with Sig's age and his relative comfort. She does not want to be old and recovered; she wants to be young and unharmed. She wishes to revert back to a time before her own coming-of-age, like maybe Beatrice does after the end of "Spoils." She has not been empowered by understanding the world—she has only been hurt by it. My intention with "A Child Again" is to bring together all the themes from the other stories and create not a grand, sweeping finale, but a quiet revelation for a character who has always been alone, and who has never understood what to do with herself and all she has suffered.

In most of these stories, the big, breaking point moment that typically leads to a climax is absent. These stories, in keeping with the theme of a secret self, have a distinct inability to reach their own breaking points. That big moment is not as necessary to these stories as the small moments and conversations and circumstances that help create atmospheres of isolation. Much more important than what characters say is what characters *want* to say or *think about* saying. These phrases are used

throughout the collection, and though I didn't realize this while writing them individually, once put together it inevitably became a theme of the work.

“Catfish Mystique” is probably the exception to this anticlimactic world, because there is a specific moment of intense confrontation. However, even though this might be the climax of the story, it is not the point of the story. Fitz's relationship with Cece is the real crux of what is going on, and their relationship lacks a moment of true climactic confrontation.

“We Did These Things Together” was the first story written in this collection (though it has been revised) and “School Night” was the most recent (and was not thoroughly revised). From the writing of the first to the most recent, I believe the stories have gained stronger voice and grounded-ness, and have lost the elements of preaching and commentary that I used to think were so important. Though I am still proud of “We Did These Things Together,” I almost feel like a different person wrote it. I wanted it to be *clever*, and tried really hard to make it so. Though much of the wordplay and ridiculous elements of allegory have been revised out of the story, some of that ambitious cleverness still remains. It is my least favorite story, even though I deeply feel for my characters in it in a way that I don't feel for all of them.

Five contemporary authors have heavily influenced this work. Though they aren't all my “favorite” writers, their writings have had the most serious impact on my own narrative style.

Tony Kushner's plays have taught me dialogue better than any work of fiction ever could. His use of scene to complicate character dynamics, instead of summary, is extraordinary—as is his ability to make even the most despicable characters and

circumstances of life humorous and understandable, even when it is difficult.

Especially in the “chatty” quality that readers of my stories have pointed out (evident in “A Child Again” and “The Favorite” and “Hopeful Green Stuff Woven”), I think his influence is clear.

Rebecca Curtis, a contemporary short-story writer, is another influence. The first time I read one of her stories—“The Christmas Miracle,” published at Christmastime in 2013 in *The New Yorker*—I could have jumped up and down with delight. Here was a story that did EVERY SINGLE THING I wanted to do in my own work, and that I longed to see among the ranks of “high” literature. And there it was, in the “highest” magazine of them all! She uses superstition, pseudo-science, sometimes magic, and always the lurking darkness of often devastating reality to create short bright flashes of brilliance. Her work also incorporates much of the idea of the “secret self,” especially among young women.

At the sentence level, two of my greatest influences are Allan Gurganus and Michelle Huneven. Gurganus’s story collection *White People* and Huneven’s novels *Blame* and *Off Course* are written with such natural grace and lyricism that the beauty of the sentence never distracts from the importance of the plot. Both of these writers are greatly under-read even though they are critically appreciated, yet the ease with which one can read their works might suggest the opposite. They also both have such deeply realized and lovable characters in their works, which is something I have tried to achieve in my own. From both of them I have learned to let words form and arrange themselves naturally, never trying too hard to come up with something

impressive, and always achieving something much more impressive with simple language that doesn't get in the way of action or emotion.

My most recent influence is the legendary Jean Rhys. In the past year, I've read three of her novels, and each outdoes the one before. *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* particularly embody my notion of the "secret self," and taught me a lot about how to write about suffering, as well as about recovery. It's hard to write about enduring pain and desperation (particularly the metaphoric and actual abuse that is one of my themes) without seeming pathetic or voyeuristic. I took a risk with "A Child Again" to use several clichéd, over-the-top types of literary suffering (drug addiction, child abuse, suicide attempt) and to try to make it neither a pathetic story nor a voyeuristic story. Jean Rhys manages to do this in her heartbreaking short novels, and I hope I have come close to doing the same. She is an inimitable writer, and I have not tried to copy her so much as I have tried to understand the beautiful energy in even her saddest and most desperate scenes by trying to write my own sad and desperate ones.

I hope you enjoy this collection, and I am pleased to share it with you. MML.

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“I love you, rotten,
Delicious rottenness.
I love to suck you out from your skins.”
-D.H. Lawrence

Spoils

I.

Out under the thumbnail moon. She's all grimace and no fight.

II.

Beatrice lives in the woods in a clapboard house, with a back porch that juts straight out into the creek. Her father keeps a canoe. She goes barefoot since she left school, signing the forms that promised she'd be homeschooled, but no one keeps up with her family to check on that. She wears her mother's old dresses.

They are not pretty dresses. Her bare feet are not white and never get tickled by Johnson grass. It is not a dreamy creek or a painted bark canoe.

Beatrice is half Indian and a quarter French, and the other quarter is something mottled.

Remember: they are not pretty dresses.

III.

Between the golf course and the rib bones of the half-standing casino. Dexter is waiting on the outer edge of the copse because he's seen what he knows is the outline of a naked girl.

She isn't worth it, he thinks. She's a grown girl and she's naked. It isn't worth it, she's gotta be crazy. The whole damn golf course can probably see her.

But Dexter's been thinking this way for almost a month now, since his family moved out from the shit part of town to here, the nearly nicest. His father says the casino might be ruining their view now, but once it's gone they'll be the first ones to have a say in what the county gets to do with the Indian money next.

Dexter doesn't follow her, but he moves around the edge so he can see her better. She doesn't seem like she does anything very interesting. She has a little radio, circa thirty years ago, that she wears on a lanyard around her neck. He imagines she is listening to classical music, or something stranger. Naked with a goddamn radio around her neck and the whole golf course community to see it.

He smokes cigarettes and pisses while he stands at the edge, just in case someone wonders what he's up to. Then he climbs one of the fattest darkest tree trunks and he lies back on one of those safe, highway-wide limbs, and he shrugs down his blue jeans, careful lest they come tumbling out a treetop.

IV.

Beatrice is in her bedroom. She's looking at porn like she knows boys do, because they always did in the locker room while she was still in school, and this porn she knows was made for boys. It's a whole glossy book of women, posing naked and beckoning on the backs of chairs or, in one weird situation, on the dining table of what looks like a Thanksgiving dinner. Beatrice looks at the women, then down at her own breasts, poking and prodding in a way that doesn't suggest pleasure, but comparison.

She puts the porn in the shoebox under her bed, labeled MINE as if anyone would come sifting through her things. Her mother left when she lost her job and her father

never leaves. He's in a wheelchair, has had a foot amputated from diabetes, and he likes to drink. When the casino closed he stopped going out of the woods. Remember: Beatrice is one-half Indian. He looks at porn and watches cable mooched off some strange satellite system on the edge of the forest.

But he is a nice man, he always asks Beatrice where she is going and Beatrice says school, and he gives her lunch money from the unemployment checks and the restitution fund, because the address it's being sent to is still on the reservation. A woman from that reservation, who intercepts them, comes three times a week and cooks a couple days' worth of meals and helps Beatrice's father around, and that is that. Her name is something like Miranda but Beatrice calls her The One-Eyed River Woman. She always offers a ride into town, but nobody takes her up on it. There is a thump like heartbeat, a necessity, when she leaves, but it's only the door against the clapboard.

V.

He's tugged himself tired for the ninth day in a row, and still he thinks she can't be worth it.

VI.

A blurry afternoon in the headmaster's office, everything hot and unfair. There are sixteen middle school boys, Terrence among them, and only one headmaster, but the headmaster is the one who gets to talk.

The whole locker room collective has been discovered. It sits in a heap on the headmaster's high desk. None of the sixteen will claim their role in amassing it, or

explain the genius of keeping their parents from finding it, because these boys are outstanding, upstanding, young men, not boys. They were selected from elementary schools across the state to come here. Their parents pay a college-looking tuition. Terrence is thinking it as he knows the others are thinking it, that they are fucked, pretty fucking fucked. He'll never see a dollar from his mom or dad again.

He leaves the office with his head bowed, nearly between his barely hairy legs, and he knows none of the other boys are looking up either. What they've done here is supposedly shameful, Terrence knows they all know, but there's a furious fever inside them that knows better and burns, a smoke signal between them, that *we must do it again*.

VII.

Beatrice's father asks her about the canoe. He has been scared, she knows, for a while now that some golf course kids might stumble upon the creek and he won't be able to fend for it. It was romantic, she knows, when he and her mother paddled away in it after their wedding vows, upcreek in the grove with the wisteria and the yucca.

She promises the canoe is still hitched and still swaying.

He says, I'm glad. You can play in it as long as you always tell me when you do.

She doesn't say, there are morning glories growing over the side of it. There are mosquitoes nesting in a puddle in the floor.

That'd be a shame, she says. Golf courers in our canoe.

Beatrice gives her father a hug around the shoulders and goes outside. She has the transistor radio around her neck, between the dress and the loose sweater. She wanders away from the house and farther down the creekside, until she's found a place just the

right kind of sunny and in vague sight of the casino where her mother used to work. She hears a quick dirty inhale from farther away, and Beatrice pulls off her clothing.

VIII.

The One-Eyed River Woman is in the clapboard house today, scooping pasta into Tupperware servings. Beatrice is hungry and eats the pasta cold, with her hands, before the woman can even store it in the fridge. It is slimy with oil, or maybe creekwater, anything goes.

Melinda, says Beatrice's father. You talked to the doctor recent?

Not in a few months.

Beatrice is slurping down the noodles.

Will you bring him next week?

Beatrice is puzzled. Why? she interrupts. Why bring him here?

I need a check-up.

Go get checked up, she says. Then points to The One-Eyed River Woman. She'll take you in her car.

The woman keeps shoveling out the pasta. That's not a bad idea, Beatrice. Your father could use a trip, she says.

I'll stay put and watch out for everything, Beatrice offers. Her father nods slowly. Remember: the canoe.

IX.

A cooler day than usual, the trees heavy before they start to change colors. It is early evening, and Dexter watches her make her way to the clearing in the copse. Today is the day. He trudges over, far from silently, but she does not turn to look. She's not in a dress, but does have a loose sweater cocked off one shoulder, mostly transparent and not warm enough.

Hey, he says, and she turns to look at him like she's expected it.

Have you heard that I'm crazy? That my parents are crazy?

No, he says. I don't think folks remember you live here.

What?

Oh, I don't know. He offers her a cigarette, which she takes but just holds in a fist.

I'm Dexter. What's your name?

Beatrice, says Beatrice.

Is this a good place to talk? he asks.

I don't know, nobody talks to me.

Dexter isn't sure what he's supposed to say to that. She is not as pretty as from far away, though she isn't ugly by any means. She is a little bit mousy, very blonde with big breasts, and dirtier than he would have thought. Not quite ethereal.

Then she says, Let's go look at my canoe. That's a better place for everything.

X.

Terrence has been confined to his room. It does not matter that this is where his laptop is, or his stereo, or his television, it is still a punishment and he knows it. He's been sent to bed without his dinner. He is hungry, but mostly he's stoic. His mother has been crying for his shame and he walks right past her up the stairs.

Terrence isn't the brainiest kid at his brainy middle school, but the other boys often look up to him. So now that they've gotten all their goddamn porn taken away, they ask Terrence, What are we gonna do?

The moms have begun to cancel pay-per-view. They tell their sons they cannot have cash. They change passwords on the household Wi-Fi. Sixteen mothers who don't seem to get the natural healthiness of being a boy. The dads don't have much input.

Terrence says, let me think about it. They respect him because he's the one willing to ask drunk golf courser dads to pick him up a pack of cigarettes, the one who will tip the child molesters outside gas stations to buy them a couple cases of beer. He lies on his bed and thinks about it, his mother speaking softly downstairs to his father, asking what are we going to do about this, Hank?

The porn gave the boys a reason to get together; hey, look what I found, wanna trade tomorrow? Once an issue of *Playboy* or a pirated HBO disc made its rounds, after each boy had his own intimate night with it, it landed in the empty locker at the King William School's gym. It was a library of sorts, and the sixteen boys in their grade were silent and generous about it. If anyone was a prude he never mentioned it.

Another hour passes, and Terrence hears his mother get out of the shower, hears her shut the door to the bedroom and turn off all the downstairs fans. Terrence wishes this

were another life, the kind with sixteen-way walkie-talkies in all the upstairs bedrooms for miles. Because it isn't, he flicks off his lamp and tiptoes down the carpeted stairway, then out the side door and into a cooler night than usual.

XI.

She wants him to eat her for Thanksgiving dinner. That's how it was with the Indians and the people who weren't, trading and toasting and thankful. So she could be naked on his table and be an offering to him.

He's kind of delicate, with black hair and freckles, which is strange, and the name Dexter does not suit him. They follow the creek for a few minutes, not saying anything. Then arrive at the back of the clapboard house. The canoe is still, waiting in the gloamlight, the water stagnant, green. Beatrice has never brought anyone to see her house, and a sudden urgency fills her, wondering if this is a terrible mistake to have brought her newly christened *Westwood Terrahawk* here. She will forget his name is Dexter. He will live up to what she calls him.

This is really weird, Westwood says.

We can't sit in the canoe. It's full of water and bugs, too. But I still thought you should see it. Pretty sure that's where I was conceived.

They sit down in the tall grass, which might look nice but isn't comfortable. He lights his cigarette. Beatrice has never smoked and only palms hers. Then Westwood asks, Do you go to school?

She says she used to. She doesn't say, My father is a crippled old Indian from the Pamunkey River. She doesn't say, I thought that was a good enough excuse to quit. She

doesn't say, Then the school just forgot about me. She doesn't say, I sure wish they hadn't.

They sit in a wet evening silence and Beatrice doesn't know what else to say. She turns her transistor radio up a little, and he looks at it closely. It's a strange dinnertime talk show about war. Westwood huffs on his cigarette in a tender way, and she likes it. Then he stands up and brushes off the seat of his jeans.

Can I come back and see you some time? he asks.

Beatrice shrugs and watches him walk back the way they came.

XII.

Out by the abandoned casino, Terrence is hot with moping. He's been out walking almost the whole night and hasn't come up with anything. His fifteen friends surely haven't either. It hasn't crossed his mind that maybe some of these boys are the repentant type and will burn constellation-hot with shame, will strike themselves or tie belts around their little hairy dicks, and say no more no more no more. Terrence doesn't believe that any of the moms could wield such authority over their sons. He doesn't think there are any bible verses that could turn them off of wet tits. No, he thinks, the solution will be for all of us. No one will be a bitch about any of it. We all went down together. We will all come out of it together. Sixteen strong. And it's up to me. He pops his knuckles and takes the lonely deep breath of a president, or maybe a general.

XIII.

Beatrice rushes inside to her bedroom and shuffles through the box labeled MINE. She takes a long hard sniff of the cigarette, then stuffs it in under the letters from the school and the photographs of herself in childhood, visiting the reservation, and the glossy porn book and the one glass bottle from that time she drank a beer.

She's already forgotten his real name is Dexter, now thinks of him only as the foreign and mysterious Westwood Terrahawk of motley mulatto Indian descent. He hasn't assimilated quite yet, no matter what kind of golf course he lives on. She allows herself to believe exactly what she wants. She can imagine herself stretched out on his clean dinner table. She can imagine him coming back to the house when her father is gone, and coming into the cleaned-out canoe. Remember: the check-up. The One-Eyed River Woman's car.

XIV.

Out under what has turned to staunch moonlight. Dexter isn't ready to wander home just yet, and he makes his way through the potholed parking lot of the casino. Almost nothing happened with the girl, Beatrice, and he didn't get to ask her anything much that he wanted to know. Like, Why aren't you ever dressed? Like, How could you really have parents?

There is a small form slouched over on the curb by the former valet stand, once configured with neon lights and a red carpet. Who's there? asks the hunchy little kid.

Dexter flicks his father's lighter and holds it up to the small boy's face.

What you doing out here, Terrence? he asks, squatting down next to him. Don't you know it's way past your bedtime?

Terrence waves his hand, wishing the lighter out of his face and assuring Dexter that he's tough enough not to give a shit. Terrence lives across the street at the golf course, and they've played video games in the clubhouse before. Got grounded, he says. Didn't get dinner. Came outside to clear my head.

Grounded?

Terrence sighs deep like a crippled Indian.

Tits, he says. Tits, I just wanted tits. We all just wanted our fair share of the kind of tits that we're finally learning we won't ever get, cause we're smart guys, nice guys, and even though we're rich guys our private school boys' school isn't gonna get us any tits. So we get them how we can have them, you know, we fucking buy them and trade them and stash them in the locker room at school. This is what makes us men. Men. We whisper in the hallways and we howl out behind the soccer field, and our balls just dropped a year or two ago so we don't know the good parts, we only know the bad parts and the wanting. We aren't ever going to see naked girls in our beds at this rate, especially if we go from here to military school, like that's some kind of goddamned honor to never get laid. And our school wants to grant us integrity, wants to let us be the best we can be, so they snatch away what was left of us as boys, the curiosity which has made us into men. I haven't ached like this in my whole life, Dex. I have nothing to say besides this.

XV.

She waves goodbye to her father as The One-Eyed River Woman wheels him down the path. Beatrice goes back inside, thinks about locking the door but remembers there is no lock, and stands at the bathroom mirror. She digs through her mother's mildewy makeup bag and finds mascara, a creamy pink blush. She applies them proudly and takes off her clothes. No use waiting today.

She spends part of the morning going through her father's things. She tastes his liquor, explores another porn magazine, this time one with men actually *doing* things to the women, and then stashes it back where it was, because it makes her ache, not tingle. She tastes his liquor again. Then she sets out to the clapboard landing on the creek and, naked, leans over the canoe.

It's a mess, and it's her mother's and father's mess, not Beatrice's. She carefully crawls inside.

The canoe tips a little, but not terribly, and she's kneeling in an inch or so of warm buggy water. She starts ripping at the morning glory and bailing out the bottom with her one cherished empty beer bottle. The transistor radio hangs around her neck by the lanyard, and she's tuned it this time to an AM Elvis station. All she can think about is how she knows Westwood Terrahawk will show up and talk to her, or maybe not talk to her, she can't decide which would be better. All Beatrice knows for sure is she wants him in this canoe with her, floating in the gloaming until her father gets home.

He shows up. There's an unlit cigarette drooping from his mouth, and he looks at her bent naked body with concentration. He doesn't look swept up in her, and she gets flustered.

You busy? is all he asks.

XVI.

Out under that thumbnail moon. Beatrice is confused but not angry, naked as the day she was born and like so many days since then. Her father came back from the doctor drugged up, apparently something with him is worse than expected, and The One-Eyed River Woman stayed and made pie.

Beatrice did not ask why and hurried outside, climbed into the canoe. She yanked the radio off the lanyard and tied the lanyard around her forehead, like the Indian tiara she knows her mother asked to wear when she got married. Her mother left them nearly two whole years ago now, right when the casino closed and they realized a new job would take a car. She lives in town, near the school where Beatrice used to go, and sometimes The One-Eyed River Woman says she runs into her. Beatrice does not go looking.

She and Westwood patched the biggest canoe hole with the tarpaper her father sometimes used on the house. She and Westwood did not do anything else. She doesn't know what it feels like to have a friend. She is scared of assuming he is one.

Beatrice knows it will be different tonight, that's what he told her when he came and stood over her while she yanked and tossed at the waterweeds. She's nervous, but maybe this is what friends are for. Beatrice used to hear that a lot at school: That's what friends are for. She hears it now, but it doesn't come together. Friends are for sacrificing under the embarrassed glance of the moon. Friends are for the resources they've got. Westwood Terrahawk has promised her something perfect in return, and she gulps down

one last sip of liquor, rubs creekwater along her abdomen for the perfect sensation of glow. Now she is loosed from the makeshift jetty and paddles out down the tributary creek.

XVII.

All sixteen have lined themselves up silently, a few smoking cigarettes that either Dexter has offered or Terrence has bummed. The moon is not as close to full as Dexter predicted earlier, so he's nervous about the kids getting their money's worth.

Now look, he says, as if he hasn't said it before. No war whooping. No chasing after. You've gotta be quiet, and if you need your alone time, you climb a goddamn tree.

They nod, all of them do.

If any of you tell, Terrence continues. Any one of you, we all go down together, just like before. This is our redemption. For tits! he calls in a quiet mock-yell.

For tits! whispers everyone but Dexter.

There are a few more awkward quiet minutes. Dexter paces back and forth in front of them, wondering what he has done. Then there are drumbeats, or maybe simply the loud pulsing of blood inside boys. She comes downcreek with the light barely gracing the canopy, but somehow finding its way down to her flesh. She steps out of the canoe and ties it to an old strong clump of wisteria. Dexter and the rest of them can see it all plain.

After the canoe is tied she wades a little closer in the water, calf deep, but still not close enough that they could see her face. She finds where the moonlight can flank her. Dexter steps behind the line and turns away.

XVIII.

Up on a branch wide as a mama's breast. Terrence is worn out from the sight of her. He has cooed and stroked and coughed with the rest of them, and now he is still in the tree. She has gotten back in her canoe, a metal canoe. She is not supposed to be followed. They cannot see her face or know her name, those are the rules. The other boys assume she's a high schooler friend of Dexter's, Dexter at the public school locally because he didn't get accepted anywhere. These things are only real in that world. This was real and not a picture, Terrence decides, she isn't something to get confiscated. The boys are wandering off in twos and threes, victorious. Terrence stays in his tree. He thinks there's no way Dexter paid her. He thinks there's no way she goes to high school. Remember: the glint of canoe skin. Remember: the tear of a dress. Remember: how it felt to be casino kids. He thinks, she's a spirit. He thinks, what else could she be? He thinks, this could not be a woman. Then he thinks, in a pang of terror, would a man have shimmied up a tree?

Hopeful Green Stuff Woven

Nobody wanted them, but I baked sweet potatoes. I spread them across the grate-floor of the oven and tapped my knife into each after a few minutes, feeling for the snap and burn of readied flesh. The whole house was quiet but alive. Marguerite and Adam were by the door, whispering, his hand probably grazing her bare brown knee. Justine's joint crinkled from the stairs. Everyone was somewhere, but they weren't going to gather in the kitchen with me. I knew, because they never did.

I had a recurring fantasy in that house. Just before I fell asleep at night, I shut my eyes and thought of root vegetables, the give under my hand if I pressed hard enough. I saw myself from above. Everyone was there like in real life, and after the drinks and the long talks about Miró and Simic and de Beauvoir, I'd offer to make a hash. Spices and a little bit of sunflower oil on carrots, potatoes, turnips. Just like in real life, too. But when I imagined it, they all said yes. They sat around the table and waited, elbows and forks and all. Someone spoke about her art, how it moved her, and everyone else listened, chewed. They took turns bearing themselves to us all. I wondered why they would say yes this time and then looked around the room, noticing boards on the windows and the strange halos of fog around our heads. The world was obviously ending. And at this dream of a moment, in our house at the edge of the forest, it was not enough to know theory and art and how to see the world more clearly. It was time for people like me, who could grow, and cook, and nurture. In the fantasy, I had a secret cellar of root vegetables that the strange bad light had never touched. Everyone would starve without me—Angeline

would turn to bones, and Inez's paintings of Angeline would turn to disparate lines. In this world before sleep, they would clap and chant and draw me a hot bath filled with lavender. They would not ignore the meal before them, or tell me they were off starch, or snicker and say I was *domestic*. They would ask to rub me with salves, ask to save my skin from the radiation before their own.

In the real world, after the sweet potatoes finished and whistled, the house was quiet. I took the potatoes off the grate with gardening gloves, dropping them into the bowl before they could burn through. There was fresh goat's cheese from the barter-market, and I sliced it into pieces and laid it on a saucer with dill. We still had a half-gallon of milk, too. I kneaded the potatoes with my fingertips after they cooled a little, mashing them up under their skins. Then I set the goat cheese saucer in the bowl, hooked a finger through the milk jug handle, and went upstairs.

They were all asleep in the circle of beds, Inez curled around Angeline, hers and my own bed empty. I put the food on the floor in the center of the room and went around the circle, rubbing each person just below their shoulder and clinging for a moment, electric, to the touch, and telling them that I made dinner.

It was four in the morning.

They all got out of bed, still dizzy from sleep or what they were doing before sleep, and sat around the steaming potatoes. They pinched off hunks of the goat's cheese with dirty, adept fingers. They talked and laughed. They passed around the milk. They shared a joint. I stood by Justine's bed, nodding and smiling even though no one looked at me, and it was good of me, I knew, it was interesting and strange of me to make dinner in the middle of the night. They would not look at me with eyes that meant I was

something simple and regular. Hugh ate the last potato skin. Inez swiped her finger through the slimy trail of goat's cheese in the saucer. I took the dishes downstairs and rinsed. When I went back upstairs in the top-heavy house, everyone was asleep again, but I imagined in the dark they were smiling.

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Months earlier, I had arrived. Inez had a kerchief tied around her hair. She was wrinkled and sunburnt, in her forties. Hugh was shirtless, wearing slacks, and nearly gray-headed. I told them my name was Nadine. It was not the first question they asked me. They looked at each other and nodded, smiled, as if it sounded just right—*Nadine*—next to their own names.

“And how did you hear about our project?” Hugh asked. His sweat looked good on him. We were sitting at a plastic table under some eucalyptus trees. The house was about forty feet away and I hadn't been inside. I couldn't figure out where the door was, and I'd gotten fixated on finding it in the past few minutes. The house looked like a fortress on the outside, panels of wood so precise and neverending. What a strange feeling, to be so outside of something. The whole place a brand new geography, and I knew I couldn't map it if I tried.

“Louis at the chicken farm told me,” I said. It didn't hurt at all when I said it. “He's come out this way before for the barter-market. I've worked with him for years.”

Hugh looked at Inez and she said, *the small brown eggs*. He nodded and turned back to me. “So tell us what you grow.”

Where was the door to the house? Did they lean a ladder to the upstairs windows? Did it slide out of a pocket panel and sit wide open on warm weather days?

I said, beans. I said, mustards. I said, spinach. I said, tomatoes. I said, broccoli with the right equipment. I said, lettuce if we've got the set-up for the broccoli. I said, but root vegetables would do well here; I'd like to learn how to grow some of those. Then I said, herbs that go in pots by the door.

The door. A tunnel? A set of stairs carved straight into the earth?

"Let's show you around," Inez said.

I was excited. I turned toward the house, but they both walked the other way. We stepped across the tree line, the tangled old-growth cedar and pine, and came to a clearing after a minute. There was a heap of dead plant matter, and Hugh motioned like I should be examining it. Tomato plants and almond saplings and the long vine of what looked like pumpkin.

I almost said, *this is ridiculous*. This is a stupid combination for this climate. And the shade on the outskirts of the clearing isn't helping. And the lack of a fence, that too. Instead I said, "I could really revamp this for you."

Inez and Hugh looked at each other, split a long moment sideways, and then said if I wanted to sign some papers now, we could go take a look at the house. I wanted to be inside it, and pass through the panels in whatever way the others did. Maybe it took a password or a fingerprint on a pad.

I was surprised that I had not seen it, though, when we came to the door, which was strange indeed but nothing magical among the paneling, just a half-door like in Snow White or the oldest kinds of barns. Not like the kind at Louis's chicken farm, with his

moveable, more humane coops. Those had full doors, made from recycled chain link and shining.

I slept on a cot the first week. There was a small kitchen and a dining room converted into a catchall living space, and the upstairs was nearly three times as large, jutting out from its foundation like a UFO, like the whole house was some vaguely formed mushroom. I didn't get to see the upstairs. I brought my one small canvas sack of shoes and clothes and a hairbrush and put it in a cupboard by the door. I liked the house best when the door was closed and I was on the inside.

They didn't tell me what was upstairs. They introduced themselves in their own ways: Adam name-dropping the greats, saying he loved Gauguin's more dreamlike period, Justine with a cigarette in her open palm, Marguerite by brushing hair from my sweaty forehead, and Angeline only when Inez brought her to me.

Angeline was seventeen. She rarely spoke.

The others were older, Hugh and Inez the oldest, and they all did different kinds of art—which I learned as they denied all of my dinners and snacks to pursue them. Adam and Inez both painted and drew, Marguerite made music, Hugh wrote stories or essays or something, Justine wrote poetry, and I couldn't tell what Angeline did except stand in corners and let the others brush her hair.

After the first week, after I used up the barter-market rations baking a carrot pie the first night that no one wanted to eat and then tropical chutney another day that no one even smiled at, they told me I could move upstairs. There was only the circle of narrow hospital beds, and outside the circle, beneath the windows, Justine's six or seven flowerbeds of mushrooms under floor lamps.

“Those go to a different barter-market,” she told me.

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After long weeks in the house, learning their ways and watching their art and watching how they clung to each other at night, in bed or before it, I realized they didn't want to eat anything that could resemble a family meal or a sit-down dinner. I got used to cooking and leaving the food to sit out, or surprising them in the night with weird snacks. I imagined each of them growing up in a house like the one I had lived in before I met Louis.

Hugh and Inez had founded The Green House nine years before, as a rejection of ownership and an opportunity to pursue their respective arts without intrusion. Neither had left the property since, except for weekly barter-market visits on the outskirts of the city. They owned nothing, not even the property, it was rented from some relative of Hugh's ex-girlfriend. There were records and books in the different studios—books in Hugh's, because he was the writer, and the only turntable in the west studio. But no one ever touched them. You would think these writers and musicians had forgotten books and records existed.

Though I had planned to, I didn't ever go listen to the music. The west studio was almost exclusively Marguerite's, or Hugh's if he was writing music. I forgot about the books and the turntable. Instead I thought about my promises to the garden, to the household, that I would revamp it and bring it some kind of new, green potential. I took my boots off only to sleep, and when I slept they were close enough that I could smell the worms and the compost, even over the stench of my body. Our compost came straight

from the outhouse. They touched each other so often, but even if they didn't touch me, I knew their most private textures. I went to bed imagining the end of *The Green House*, the real end of ownership, and sometimes I got so excited that I put my boots back on.

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Marguerite's husband came out on the weekends. Whether they were still married or not was unclear, because he wore a ring but she didn't. He drove a black jeep and wore name-brand checkerboard button-downs with just a little bit of chest hair peeking out. I always knew how we smelled but never thought about it badly, until he—his name was Kent—showed up on Saturday mornings carrying scents like soap and salted butter. I couldn't have been the only one to notice the distinction between us. I caught Justine once brushing her hair on a Friday night, smoothing it with water filled with thyme, then plaiting it into sections before covering it.

Kent brought a few things from the co-op on the drive, things we never would have thought to ask for, even though it was an unspoken rule, we never asked for anything. He brought hand-woven oven mitts once, which were relegated to me, and sometimes chocolate-covered walnuts or raisins. But every weekend Kent brought their daughter, Anaïs, who was probably five. Kent slept on the back studio cot, but Anaïs got to sleep upstairs.

I cooked Sunday brunch, but it always sat on plates in the kitchen until everyone got around to leaning over the counter and eating it between blocks of studio time. Sometimes I boiled chickens that someone got from Louis at the barter-market, then let them rest in lemons, but these were always eaten cold, picked off the bone by the

eighteen different hands of the house, and I never heard anything about the flavor. When I peeled the breasts apart, letting the bones slosh into the pot, something I could make a broth out of, it was like I was reaching back in time to the chicken farm. I was touching the chickens I had once helped to raise, and sometimes it almost felt like touching Louis.

One morning, as I split eggs and peeled onions for a quiche—which would surely also be eaten cold and in crooked, manhandled slices—Marguerite came in from the front studio and Anaïs sat on the floor beside me.

It was only nine that Sunday morning, far too early for any of the group to stir, so she and her daughter must have been on one of her Sound Quests, as the whole house called them. Marguerite made music with her cello, her sitar, loose percussion, plenty of acid, and animal noises. She trekked into the forest at off hours, trying to get tape rolling with the owl hoots and the grasshopper chirring. She inlaid these into her tracks and made CDs that sometimes went for a small bag of beans at the barter-market, but I'd never heard of her actually selling one. Adam sharpie-d every disc into its own one-of-a-kind portrait of the musician, but at best they looked like high school mixes.

Marguerite went out the door to the west studio. Anaïs stood up just behind me. I thought for a moment she might reach forward with her small thin arms and hug my legs, maybe just press a hand against my thigh. When she didn't I helped her climb up on the counter, away from the bowl of ingredients. She rubbed her small hands together and watched.

If I had not left the city that came before the chicken farm, maybe Anaïs could have been my own little girl. Her hair was much lighter than mine but our skin could have overlapped without faltering. Maybe I could have been making my own little girl

some scrambled eggs and biscuits with butter and peach jam. As she sat and watched, I talked to her. I asked her about colors and the drive from town. Before I knew what I was doing, the bowl of eggs was in the icebox. I had started on batter with blackberries inside. She told me she liked pancakes. There was a caving feeling inside me, such relief and such joy. She wanted a plate. To be served. I would watch her eat and maybe she would tell me she liked it.

Her eyes would not have been blue if she were mine, though. Mine mine mine.

In that city, before I left and found Louis and the chicken farm, we had owned a house and thought about saving up toward a pool. We had a fence and a grill and a car for each of us with leather seats inside, before I got my righteous lonely feeling and said it was all too much. It made me dizzy for a moment, to remember that, and dizzier to think how Louis had saved me from it. How we had met at some organic grocery and he'd driven me out to the farm. The single pancake almost burned. I garnished the plate with extra berries and poured Anaïs a glass of milk, scared she might ask for syrup. But instead she asked for a table, and I said here we ate things wherever we could. I wanted to see spit at the corners of her smile. I wanted her to chew with her mouth wide open. I wanted her to smack her lips and say it was delicious, the best pancake she had ever had. Sometimes I had to beat back those greedy feelings from the old days, that embarrassing *want* which had led to the loneliness, the taste for champagne or the idea of a little child to walk around with me at the country club.

“Fork?” she asked me.

“No, no fork.” I didn't say I understood the want of silverware. The cling of so many hands setting spoons against saucers at once. I rinsed the batter bowl. She had

clearly learned table manners from Kent, or maybe from Marguerite at some other juncture, and the way of things at The Green House rejected that. It made me a little embarrassed.

Anaïs picked up the pancake with her small hands and ate it slowly, in half-bites so dainty you could measure them. She was enjoying my food. She didn't realize the effort involved, she was only a child, but it didn't matter, I knew. If I started doing art the way the others did—maybe baking pottery in the oven like a child with mud as Inez had suggested—it might feel different. But I was their great sustainer. I made their children pancakes with blackberries.

Anaïs was halfway through her plate. She said it was pretty yummy. She could have been mine so easily.

Marguerite and Kent came inside together and looked at their daughter on the counter, then at me. Marguerite picked her up by the armpits and they went upstairs. Kent fondled the half-pancake, then ate it all in one motion.

“Well, this keeps getting harder,” he said matter-of-factly. Then he patted my shoulder and said, “Good pancake.”

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I watched Kent and Anaïs leave. I waved from the clearing, even though they were surely looking at Marguerite. I often forgot about The Green House when I was working in the clearing in the back. It was so much like the back property over at Louis's chicken farm that I almost felt I'd dreamt up everything else, like I'd only left one place and gone to

the other and stayed, and never had that burning feeling again. No Hugh and Inez and Justine. No studios. People who hugged me and asked for seconds.

The tomatoes were finally doing well, bearing their bald red heads sunward, and the sweet potato beds were holding up well for only a few months of root spread. In our climate, I had to use plastic sheeting on a raised bed, but the past few weeks of haul had been beautiful. Sometimes I snuck handfuls of them into the oven, then took one out if I got hungry or needed texture. The need to touch had become great in me, and my plants were the extent of it. I never tripped mushrooms with the others—neither did Angeline or Inez—but especially when we smoked, from biodegradable rolling papers, or inhaled out of apples, my need to touch something grew rampant. I kneaded my forearms through dough. I poured salt in my hands and rubbed them together. I took my shoes off and stood on the mulch. I bent over the sink slicing vegetables, once pushing my thumb against the knife's blade until it puckered up blood and I had to throw the blush-colored zucchini away.

In *The Green House*, no one brushed against my shoulder or bowed to rub my feet, the way Adam always did for Marguerite or Hugh. In four months, since Marguerite had moved unkempt bangs from my eyes, no one else had touched me. When I woke them at strange hours, interrupting the stupor of a smooth high, they never touched me back. I craved contact, sweat. Bodies pressed on bodies. If not bodies, hands pressed on hands. Sometimes I watched Angeline's bed in the darkness, pretending I could see Inez covering her.

I came in from the clearing with a basket of new tomatoes and beans, dropped them into the sink, and inhaled deeply. The house smelled pickled, musky, but I realized

it was how all of us smelled. I sweated through the same shirt daily. The scarf in my hair was soaked.

To bathe, there was an old claw-foot tub out behind the front studio, and a creek about two hundred feet away that you could fill buckets from. Usually I liked the routine and the burn of carrying all that cool water, but today I skipped the buckets and the bathtub, hot with my own smell, and risked the indecency of bathing in the creek. It would be a good chance to hunt for wild mushrooms, something I hadn't done in weeks, and they would be perfect in a bowl of warm soup, creamy but with give, made just right for slurping.

I walked down away from the house and away from the clearing, past the front studio, my face turned down in search of the little brown tendrils, the reaching yellow arms of golden chanterelles, or the wide flat tops of saffron milk caps. The whole wet world of them, hopeful and alive for my taking. People were supposed to appreciate what they ate.

I only found one, just up from the creek. It was a short little guy, white-capped with green underneath, and I didn't know if it was edible. I thought about how Louis would be able to identify it, from experience or from some guidebook he'd picked up. If I still had my phone, if I hadn't signed it away to that locked cupboard on the very first day, I would have messaged him a picture and waited for the call back, the shaky trill of his voice when he said he'd never seen one like it, that he would have to do some research. I only missed Louis in doubtful moments like this one. It was the chicken farm I missed all the time, the people coming and going to buy their weekday dinners, the restaurant buyers with their measuring tapes and stool sampling kits, the boredom and the

necessity of local free-range chicken. It was supposed to be like that here, too, a community. At least patting each other on that back. It was supposed to be better than the city and the fenced backyard, and better still than the farmer and the farm I had left that for, and now all my leaving had brought me here, where I was lonely, where I was supposed to be the least lonely of all. People spoke about The Green House with reverence, for the art being produced there and the sense of family that they all had. I couldn't figure out why I wasn't allowed. They had invited me in but not invited me in. I was here but I was not in the place they had spoken about.

“What you doing here?” came a voice from the creek.

Angeline was wearing her shirt-dress in a few feet of water. She had combed out her long dark hair over one shoulder. She had taken out her nose rings and her eyebrow ring, but through the soaked outfit I could see the clear outline of nipple rings, something I'd never noticed, even sharing the circle of beds in the upstairs. I stood on the bank a few feet above her.

“I didn't want to haul all those buckets.”

She looked more like a painting than any painting Inez ever did.

“Really, why you come here?” she said. It sounded accusatory against the pleasant trickle of the water, but maybe that was just her accent. I imagined how good it would feel to stand in the water like she was, to have it sidle up against you like a pet.

It was not about the creek. How I'd chosen something freer than the bathtub. She'd never asked me anything before. I wasn't sure she spoke English.

She was beautiful, clearly, and so young that it almost made my head hurt. When she was born, I'd been about her age. I'd played volleyball and gone to the prom. And

here she was, out in the woods for art's sake, maybe for the same community I was seeking, nipple rings and a language barrier, most of the things she said to us spoken secondhand by Inez. Maybe not even spoken right. Like me, she did not do art. But unlike me, she was a muse, someone's something. Maybe she had left and left and landed here and did not know what to do.

I decided I would not lie.

"I was lonely," I said, and in the strangeness I reached my hand out toward her, a grasping motion, and for a moment her wrist flicked upward like she was going to reach for me, too. Her hand was open and empty and wet. I almost toppled down into the creek toward her, so eager for the touch, but she suddenly looked off toward The Green House, then put her hands to her hair and started wringing it. I stepped back. After a moment our eyes met across the small muddy channel, and it felt like a sideswipe, like she was something dead but not angry, something stuck knee-deep in the water.

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Harvested sweet potatoes are still alive. They breathe. You should cover them lightly with a tarp or place them in an open paper bag, because snapped off the vine they're still breathing. In a plastic bag or sealed container, they'll all poison themselves with whatever comes out in the creaks and groans of their respiration.

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I was baking again, late. Scooping out the insides of sweet potatoes and filling them with alfalfa and tomatoes and spinach, all bound together with a little bit of cream and basil,

turning rooty vessels into something different. I could wrap these in wax paper individually, with a note to reheat, and probably get about a quarter-pound of cheese for each at the barter-market. But Marguerite wouldn't know how much they were worth, and I wasn't allowed to go until after the six-month mark. But how would I know it had been six months? We measured time in the visits from Kent and Anaïs, and I couldn't keep such good track of those anymore. Six months was fair. It made sense—it takes time to create a dynamic. Besides, Louis would be there, and he would look at me frantically, like maybe I wasn't really missing after all. He knew about the righteous lonely feeling, because it was how I had come to him from the old life. I had traded my heels for work boots and he taught me how to hoe a straight line. Maybe he understood why I was gone again, but I often imagined him in the chicken farm office with his big hands pressed against his forehead wondering what had happened to me, and then how he could get me back. It got me through the worst long nights when I wondered what I was doing here, why no one was welcoming me or teaching me or stroking my arms while we smoked.

Justine and Adam came downstairs, wrapped together in a blanket. "We're talking about Muriel Rukeyser," she said.

"I'm not," Adam said. "She is. I'm going to draw on the floor in the studio."

But neither of them left. They sat on the floor and leaned against the counter. I thought about how I could dole scoops into their mouths if they tilted back their heads. I wanted to. They looked like baby birds and they giggled like children. I could be their mother, couldn't I? Was that what they wanted me for? I could reach down and nest my fingers in their hair. I wouldn't pull tight, just tautly. It wouldn't be hard, but maybe it was wrong. Someday they could be mine to touch. Justine was mumbling about poetry

and womanhood—her eyes kept fluttering between dream and kitchen floor. Maybe I was their dream and they wanted me. Adam was tracing lines on her arm with his fingertips. Maybe he wished it were mine—me, making fanciful appetizer portions that they couldn't understand enough to eat. Would they eat a casserole I'd baked my own hair into? Would they eat spices that were my ground-up bones? It would be more than a touch if they swallowed my parts. That would be enough to sustain me. I folded the skin around the last potato, and Justine tugged at my pants leg. The fabric caught tight on my calf, and it was a rush more intense than anything I'd felt in months. I almost gasped but held steady against the counter. I almost fell sideways, overcome.

“Come with us,” she said. “There is so much art inside you.”

They stood up and took each of my hands, leading me out the door toward the front studio. It felt like the first time I ever went through it, after expecting something epic and strange—a surge of violent newness, this intimacy, her smooth white fingers on my elbow, his rough smeared hands around my own.

There was a glow ahead of us, and for a moment I imagined police cars, Louis's brown truck behind them, and behind it a BMW I used to drive. I imagined a negotiation—Hugh kept us under lockdown, and no one could find the door. Inez and Angeline had been killed in wicked crossfire. I would tell them about the secret cellar, about the weapons of my root vegetables. They worked like grenades if you knew how. We could stay here forever, and alone.

But instead we passed the front studio, all in a fuzz of light and good things, and came to the claw-foot tub. It was full of water. Everyone was standing around it.

“Get in,” Adam said.

I did. I stepped over the ledge in my boots and slowly lowered myself. They all leaned over me. It looked like they were bowing in the moonlight as it slid down into the forest.

“You guys,” I said. “I made these stuffed sweet potatoes—”

“Shh,” said Marguerite.

I looked from face to face. Everyone was smiling and glad. I could not smell myself for the lavender in the bath. Someone must have traded something wonderful for that—maybe a whole bag of our dill and chives, the ones that spread in pots by the door. The water was not cold. Hugh and Inez knelt down beside me, and they each took my hands.

“Tomorrow,” Inez said. “It really begins. You’ll really be part of the family.”

They each kissed me on the temple, then the others kissed me squarely on the forehead. I nearly fainted from the texture of their love.

Tomorrow. I had struggled through months of separations—had it been six? how could six months have passed so soon? how had I let such time slip by unchecked?—and now they knew I was worthy. Their fingertips on my shoulders, I slipped further and further into the bath, the water rising to my neck, my ears, then it covered me. I shut my eyes and felt the pressure of the water. Like being held by all of them at once. I thought about Angeline in the creek, how I had turned back toward the house from her almost running, dropping my little white mushroom as I went.

There was something off about the quiet of their kissing now, how they kept on and wouldn’t stop, and I thought about that strange glow down further in the forest. But how good it felt to be touched. I came up and breathed deeply and they all leaned down

toward me again. And Inez had said family, and what family meant to me was that we'd eat four courses at dinner, our elbows clanging and touching and warm with the contact of the other's. The discussions of the greats over wine and hors d'oeuvres. A table fully set.

School Night

I was down on my knees and Deb was wiggling my tooth. There was a loud CLATTER from the garage, and we both turned toward it, like maybe we could see through the yellow kitchen walls and find out what was happening.

I figured RACCOONS and faced back up at Deb. Her fingers were still on my fourth bottom tooth on the left. It was the last baby tooth I had, and nobody else at school had any. I'd been bugging her about it since my parents left at six-thirty for the fundraiser and she finally said why not. But Deb was looking the other way.

"Juth do it Deb!" I called as best as I could. Her fingers were busy and wrong in my mouth. She looked down at me, her eyes all big or maybe it was the angle, and she ripped hard and I said "Aggh!" but it didn't hurt that much. I could taste blood in the gutters around my tongue. She was right, it hadn't been ready to pull yet.

"Crap," she said. "Let's get you some cotton balls or something."

I pushed up off the tile floor and sat down on the countertop while she went looking. I faced the fridge. There were my spelling tests, lists of words like APPLICATION and RECESSION and COWARD, in a short column, and next to that a picture I drew in my Creative Process Survey of me and some dogs, Jack Russell terriers and a big fat Chinese Shar-Pei, which I knew about because of the New Revised Encyclopedia of Dog Breeds which I had instead of a pet because of all of my dad's sad allergies.

There was another CLATTER! CLATTER! in the garage and I called out, “Do you think my bike is ok in there?”

The pizza box was still on the table. I wondered if Deb would make me take out the trash. The pepperoni grease would smell funky if we left it there overnight. Usually when Deb came to babysit my mom had leftovers in the fridge for us. But the fundraiser had been months in the making! And trash was one of my chores.

I heard something fall in the bathroom. I imagined a stampede of all kinds of little furry critters that had invaded. A couple VERMIN might get stuck inside and have to become our pets.

Deb was suddenly beside me, and lifted me off the counter, and I laughed, and she said, “Be quiet.” I was in her arms like a baby, even though I weighed as much as any fourth-grader. She took me into the bathroom and set me in the sink. She fumbled with the gold knob of the door.

“Hey—” I said. It wasn’t very comfortable.

“Listen to me right now, Joanie. Stop talking.”

Then I got scared. I felt like I was going to have DIARRHEA (everybody had laughed at that one, but it was an important and difficult word) right there in the sink. It hadn’t occurred to me that anything bad could happen in my house, in a place where my mom and dad or Deb were always staying up until after I fell asleep.

“We are going to be calm and quiet.” She took a deep breath between each sentence, like following doctor’s orders. “I think there is someone in the garage. This lock isn’t working.” There actually wasn’t a lock. I had been taught about privacy. “I’m going to call the police.”

“Where’s your phone?” I asked. I might have sounded mad but I was just scared. I wanted to apologize for it. No one is supposed to be in your garage when you have a security system. If only we’d had a guard dog. Maybe we’d have to stay in here forever. Live on the cough drops in the medicine cabinet.

Deb’s face fell. She looked down at her hands. In one was a pile of cotton balls. In the other was my fourth bottom tooth.

“The door to the garage is locked right?”

My mouth fell open about halfway. I had no idea. We hadn’t gone outside since my parents left. I wondered if they were having fun at the fundraiser. They had been all dressed up and smiling. Sometimes they locked it and sometimes not.

“I’ll go get my phone,” she said. “Stay put.”

I was proud of my parents for picking Deb to be my babysitter. She had taken a few times to get to know—she was fifteen, a nail biter, and wore the same pair of stretchy track pants every time she babysat, as if we were going to be doing GYMNASTICS. Some of the really cool high school girls babysat my friends, and Deb definitely wasn’t cool. She had a mole on her nose that always distracted from the rest of her, but it didn’t really mean she was ugly. And she was on the academic quiz bowl team. But we got along good, and she watched movies with interest and never laughed or CONDESCENDED when I said hey maybe we could get out my *old* paper dolls.

She gave me a pat on the shoulder and clicked open the door.

When Deb opened the door and there was a man standing outside of it, neither of us made a noise, or jumped, or cried.

He had a black scarf tied around the bottom half of his head, and a beanie on. I thought he was probably blond. He said, “Come on out.” I guessed we didn’t get to make a decision. He narrowed his eyes at me, focused hard like to decide what he’d do with me, and Deb kind of croaked out like she was going to say something, but he leaned over and grabbed my chin before she could. His hold was tense.

“Why the fuck are you bleeding?” he asked me, and in all the CLATTER I’d forgotten that I was. I forgot about the tooth, and for a minute thought he’d already hurt me. I was already his garbage, his wreck. He jerked my head sideways and then looked at Deb. He had not accounted for something that was happening. Maybe she had hit me, maybe we seemed super tough. Deb, I wanted to ask, what do we tell him?

He made us walk back into the kitchen. He pulled out the chairs and flipped his hands upwards, like to say, Have a seat, ladies, but not in a nice way. We sat down. I wanted a cue from Deb.

He knelt and tied our hands to the chair backs with plastic zip-ties. If we hadn’t been here, what would he have done with those? He didn’t put any tape on our mouths or anything, and my feet were free to kick at him but I didn’t. He left us there and walked down the hall.

“Why didn’t we just go out the front door?” Deb grunted.

The front door. I hadn’t thought of it. It was on the OPPOSITE side of the kitchen, and it led to the lighted pathway to the street. He’d been in the garage. And we had hidden. I felt the tingles in the kitchen with us, the same way I used to when I scared myself for no reason. His footsteps on the tile were soft, but they bounced an electricity back to us. I wondered if Deb felt it, too. Like a stampede in the hallway,

REVERBERATING across half the house. I thought about the stampede I'd dreamed up, all squirrels and rabbits and groundhogs among them, and that idea felt like years ago, a different me.

Deb's phone was on the table by the pizza box, and it vibrated. She was taking short hiccupy breaths.

"We are going to be fine, Joanie," she said a couple of different times. I nodded. My wrists hurt angled back around the chair like that.

The man ducked his head around a hallway corner like to check that we were still there. Deb didn't drive, so he probably thought nobody was home. Guard dogs. Doberman Pinschers. That's all we needed.

There were some speckles of blood on the tile from facing downward after my tooth came out.

He went into my parents' room and shut the door.

"What do we do?" I asked. "Should we scream? Maybe Mr. Kesterson will hear us?"

He was going to come back to us in all that black he wore like an animal, and we were not prepared. It sent prickles through me, from my fingers down to that place below my stomach where all the bad feelings always zinged.

Deb shook her head and cooed soft things at me. "He will leave soon, and then we will just wait on your parents."

"He's a thief? Not a murderer? He's not going to kill us, you don't think?" I couldn't control all the fast words coming out of my mouth. I thought about my bedroom,

all the way upstairs, how my paper dolls and my stuffed animals were safe there and still would be later, no matter what happened. He hadn't come for any of that.

"Stay calm," Deb said. It was like now that he had bent so close to us Deb was no longer afraid. She seemed faintly drugged, somehow comfortable. There was something ANTICIPATORY in her pose.

He came back out of my parents' bedroom and walked over. His eyes darted like he was making it up as he went. He opened a fancy red knife. I cringed and started huffing, trying to think what I could say to prevent this. How much I loved all those things in my room. What else? I was ten. Did I have to deserve my life?

I opened my eyes. He slashed Deb's ties and then mine. We might have been stuck there four minutes.

He stood us up, held Deb under her arm, and grumbled at me.

"You have to go back in the bathroom. I changed my mind. You're going to stay in there." I almost nodded, did the calm and right thing that Deb would have suggested, but suddenly I felt hot in my wrists and my ankles and a deep feeling of ownership arose for my house.

"TAE KWON DO!" I shouted. I couldn't think of what Tae Kwan Do moves would look like, though, so I just struck a menacing pose. Arms above my head, hands clenched like I was holding sheriff's badges.

But the man just shook his head at me, and pointed back to the chairs in the kitchen.

"Please cooperate," he said.

I hung my head and obliged him. What else was I supposed to do? Deb faced the OPPOSITE direction, looking toward the bedroom, which was lit. He had turned on the lamp by the bed, the one that always let me know Mom or Dad was still awake when I came downstairs. I had to do something. Deb was going to die, maybe, and all because she'd come here to babysit. Well, more because she'd forgotten to bring her phone to the bathroom, and even more because we'd forgotten we could just go out the front door.

"I won't cause a problem," I called. "If you promise you won't kill us!"

He frowned at me. I couldn't see his mouth under the scarf, but his eyes looked like he frowned at me. "No," he said. He rearranged his handhold on Deb. "I'm not going to kill you."

"Just stay put, Joanie," Deb said. She was staring off at my parents' bedroom.

He came back to me and pulled out another zip tie. He had changed his mind again. This time he hooked it around the refrigerator door and pulled it tight so I could barely feel my wrists. If I pulled against it, which I did as he closed the bedroom door behind them, the refrigerator door opened, and I had to walk in a semicircle and then walk backward to shut it. I could smell our leftover pizza slices. Ached momentarily for a glass of cold milk.

The door to the bedroom closed.

What were they doing in there, I wondered. I imagined Deb trying on all my mom's clothes. Sitting at her vanity, fingering her makeup brushes like sometimes I did. I swung left, opening the refrigerator again. It hummed. I couldn't hear the man or Deb. I wondered if my parents would be home soon. My dad could go kill the man in his

bedroom, pull whatever he'd stolen out of his bag and put it back in all our proper places. My mom would grab a kitchen knife and WHOOSH I would be free.

The icemaker tumbled on in the freezer. For a moment it sounded like a CLATTER and I thought it was all happening again.

How was he going to kill Deb? I'd hear a gun. So would Mr. Kesterson next door. The shiny knife was small, but I guessed all knives work the same. I couldn't even think of any other ways that somebody else might make you die. I measured the minutes in tightly paced semicircles, opening and shutting the fridge. The lamp was still on in the bedroom. My belly clenched fist-tight.

He was not killing Deb. I wanted the not-killing of her to be over.

After fifty-three semicircles he left the bedroom, shut the door with a nudge, and walked out through the garage. He didn't even look over at me, or wonder if I was still there. I almost screamed at him that he hadn't killed me, but that probably wasn't a good idea. A horn honked somewhere down the street.

"DEB!" I yelled. I yelled it so loud and so many times that it turned into more of a cough than a word, and before I knew it I was crying, because he had lied to me, she was dead. She was like my sister and my friend, and somehow I knew I had killed her. The electric, heavy feeling hung in the house. It had come off of him and stayed behind.

I walked backwards until the refrigerator closed. The hum helped calm me down. I took deep breaths like Deb had done at the beginning of it. Then she came out of the bedroom. She looked pretty much ok.

She came and sat on the floor next to me.

I felt stupid for crying if she wasn't.

“Can you get your phone now?” I asked, sniffing.

“I just want to wait a minute,” she said. She stared hard at the tile—I wondered if she had seen the specks of my blood.

“What happened?” I asked. I didn’t demand she untie me, but my arms were really hurting at this point. I tried not to seem so pathetic. “What did he take?” I asked. I thought about my mom’s JEWELRY (tempting to put a third E in there, but no) drawer. My dad’s watches. I would have noticed if he left with their TV.

“The man—he—” I began again.

She croaked a half-laugh. “Boy,” she said. “He was a boy.”

“What are you talking about?” I sniffled some more.

“He had on basketball socks.”

There was a moment, or an almost-moment, where it seemed like Deb might smile. Instead she blinked hard a few times and kept on staring at the floor.

“Socks?” I asked. I was embarrassed. No boy would break in and scare us like that. If he’d been a kid like us, our own kind, he would have felt some allegiance. And she didn’t respond, so I said, “Deb, please cut me off the refrigerator.”

She did it. I ran to the phone and dialed 911.

Deb sat back down, cross-legged on the floor, between a spatter of blood from my mouth and the two halves of a sliced zip-tie. She shook her head in DISBELIEF. I told them the address of my emergency, and then they asked what it was.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Somebody broke in. He tied us up.”

The DISPATCHER had a faint accent, and I imagined she had grown up being rocked in a hammock, her front yard the sand of a beach. “Keep talking to me, sweetie,”

she said. "Tell me what else happened." But I couldn't think of anything else, because nobody (Deb) was telling me anything, and so I just kept saying that I was in pain, because I was, my wrists hurt, and so when the ambulance showed up they circled me, to help me, and not Deb. They saw the dried blood around my mouth. My parents had arrived first, and they were mildly drunk it seemed, but they both cried and then I cried more. They held me close, and my Dad in all his emotions put three hundred dollars in Deb's hand. She would have refused it, I think, any other night. They knew I was not the one who had been hurt. We talked to a pretty lady police officer with soft hands that patted ours, and then Deb talked to her in private.

Deb walked home soon after. I think my dad would've driven her, but I don't think he was supposed to be driving. Before she left, she touched the pocket of her track pants and made sure the three hundred dollars were still there. Then she made sure I had my tooth, that it hadn't been lost in the excitement. She put it in my hand, smiled, and hugged me.

That was her word, the excitement.

There was a boy in my class named Fletcher Adams. He knew all the NITTY-GRITTY as the other boys called it. When one of them picked up the tampon that fell out of Angelica Turney's backpack, they took it to Fletcher and he explained. I asked my friend Leon to recount the EXPLANATION (no I like in EXPLAIN) to me, and he laughed.

But Fletcher always knew the neat-deets, too. In second grade, he told me and Alise and Ella and Isabelle and Emma Kate how we had each been made. In our mom's stomachs, sure, we always knew that, and yeah, we knew something about dads putting us there in the first place, but he took the longest fingers on each of his hands and did a DEMONSTRATION. Alise went home sick later that day, and I felt sorry for her. I could handle the truth.

But that night after he told us, before bed when Mom and Dad came upstairs and gave me and Charlie and Burt, my stuffed-animal Golden Retrievers, our goodnight hugs and kisses, I got a bad feeling down in the deep heart of my belly. Mom asked me, "Joanie-bug (not a real word, just a nickname), do you feel ok?"

And then I started crying. I cried like a little baby. I felt like I should take a couple more showers before I got in these nice clean green sheets that Mom had washed for me. Mom and Dad sat on both sides of me, and they were patting my back and giving me little kisses and asking what had happened, what was wrong. I just shook my head. I loved their little kisses on my wet hair but it made me feel dirty now, because I was wondering about how they kissed each other downstairs in their own bed at night, and if that was what had led to me. I told them I was sad because I had seen some tiny stray black dogs on the side of the road and I was worried about them because it was cold outside. I felt bad for lying, but what can you do. Dad tucked my head under his chin and said softly that everything would be ok and he bet their owner had found them. Mom hugged both of us as best she could, and she told me what a big heart I had. They smiled and held me until I stopped crying, even though I felt dirty, hugely UNWORTHY of that love. I tucked Charlie and Burt under my arms and I eventually fell asleep, dreaming of a

row of flying babies coming in and out the open windows of our house. I had always liked babies, but suddenly they were something brand new. I felt confused and ashamed, but also like I'd known it all along. How a dog might feel seeing his tongue REFLECTED on a bright day in a bowl of water. Scared! Part of everything, but something I'd never even known was there! But hey, do dogs even feel, you have to wonder.

Lolei

Dooley had come to help. The orphanages and shelters around Phnom Penh looked a little desperate, the women outside them in fishnets and disaster-relief fund shirts that said things like GIVE BLOOD, SAVE A LIFE. Dooley did not want these women's blood or whatever was floating around inside it. He called them women because he did not want to think about how they were girls, maybe fourteen, defeated, not even bothering to wink or gesture.

He left Phnom Penh. It had only been a destination of convenience. He took a bus south. *I will see Angkor*, Dooley decided. He knew the whole country was doing poorly, so it didn't matter which city he picked. He had read about it in thin yellow magazines, the sex tourism and the white businessmen on holiday. He had read about what happened to the children.

The bus smelled like petrol—he'd learned at some point to call it petrol—and overripe fruit. He sat next to a thin young man in a starched white shirt and navy slacks without sweat marks. The man asked Dooley where he came from. Then if it were business or holiday. Dooley waved his hands and explained: he had come to help. He wanted to work with the children, he said, the poor and impoverished and the ex-slave children.

The thin man nodded. "I know a place," he said. "Out a few kilometers from Siem Reap."

“Is it near the temples?”

The thin man laughed. “If you see one temple, you have seen them all.”

“But it is?”

“Yes. Of course. We have a saying here, you know. If you aren’t in the killing field, you are in a temple.” He was still laughing.

From the bus station Dooley hired a tuktuk. He had avoided them in Phnom Penh, thinking it would only make him look whiter than he already was, but now, here, it felt all right. His driver was named Cesar. Dooley explained about the thin man on the bus, where he had said to go. The country had his heart, he told Cesar. Then he worried about how that sounded.

“So I am going to that orphanage in the Roluos,” he said, with what he thought might be authority.

Cesar contemplated this, staring forward on his motorcycle while Dooley stood to one side.

“No orphanages at Roluos. Don’t want to go to Angkor Wat?”

Dooley did not have any alternative. “Where is there an orphanage? I want to go to the one at Roluos.”

“Well.” He paused. “We can go to Roluos,” Cesar replied. They sped into the hot cough of the traffic.

Dooley saw a water buffalo being led in a field off the street by a man in a San Francisco Giants t-shirt. He saw a sign between hotels that said ALCOHOL

MILKSHAKE. He wanted to stop for that. He saw a lot of hammocks in souvenir stalls, just a few inches from the ground, rocking little babies to sleep. They looked poor and impoverished but not old enough to be ex-slaves.

The tuktuk did not turn for a while, and when it did there was a tour bus ahead of them. Dooley leaned forward across the carriage of the tuktuk and asked Cesar if they were near the temples.

“Bakong first,” he said. “Lolei second.”

Dooley didn't know what Bakong or Lolei were, so he nodded and sat back. He shielded his eyes from the sun and watched several brown faces in the bus windows. He dismissed them as tourists. *They have only come to visit. They have come to take photos and brag.*

Bakong was Dooley's first temple since undergrad. His girlfriend, Alta, had been a Religious Studies major, and they found Hindu temples in and around Chicago. Buddhist, too, but she was partial to the Hindus. Those temples were often low-ceilinged buildings made of brick. You could mistake them for doctors' offices or insurance agencies. Alta did not talk much about her interest in religion, she just wanted company in unfamiliar territory. Dooley appreciated the intelligent approach to higher powers. He didn't *disbelieve*, but he didn't celebrate anything either. Nothing had ever really seemed like God to him.

When he met Alta, Dooley's first thought was that her parents were stupid. They had named her “tall.” He asked her if she knew this and she looked back at him with

neither interest nor surprise. After that, he really wanted to fuck her. She had plain curly hair and plain dark skin, and her eyes were a plain pale blue.

After they fucked, he felt bad. She got livelier. Her pale eyes jumped. He had such guilt, to have only wanted this eager thing for sex. So he asked her out, and they stayed together through her Master's degree and his rejections from every PhD program he considered. After he finally got into a good one, studying physics, they moved together. Alta would say, "You didn't get in because we weren't meant to be apart. We get to stay together through *both* of our degrees. Doesn't that mean a lot to you, too?"

Now Alta worked for a nonprofit that dealt with refugees she never had to look at. The Chicago office processed worldwide war and relocation statistics for organizations like the UN and the WHO and FEMA, so Alta's thoughts were always far away. It didn't matter the beliefs of her statistics. She did not go to temples anymore. Instead she did things like get mad at Dooley, who sometimes stayed away too long when he went out. They were both still twenty-eight and attractive, and they could afford pressed slacks and dry-clean-only dresses. Dooley was working as an adjunct, which really meant he taught two freshman physics classes and spent the rest of his day in the lab. He listened to really loud rap. He studied things that he didn't bother to explain to anyone, didn't have the patience to articulate. No one except Alta minded. She thought he didn't do anything, she thought he was a liar and a cheat—which was only sort of right, and *was for her sake anyway*. Alta had left Dooley. Dooley would show her what he could do.

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So, Bakong. Dooley stepped out of the tuktuk and the hecklers came up quickly, at first some mothers with babies, some preteen girls with bracelets up to their elbows, and a man on a crutch with a LAND MINE VICTIM sign around his neck like he was for sale. Dooley didn't want any of the Angkor kitsch, and if he did, he decided, he could not buy it anyway. But what Dooley did want was a cold drink. He realized it as a beautiful brown woman waved a pink Fanta can in the air, calling "Cold drink! Cold drink! Fifty cent!"

Dooley looked back at Cesar, who was leaning up against the tuktuk and laughing with other drivers in the dusty parking area. *I do not need permission*, Dooley thought.

He walked over to the woman, eyes clinched hard on the pink soda can. She waved him into her stall and said "Thank you, thank you, hard to make money so far away." Dooley didn't know if she meant the Roluos or Bakong or what it was they were so far away from. He leaned into her cooler, past its padlocks, and grabbed one of the pink cans. It was raspberry soda, and the taste made him laugh when he cracked it open. It was like something a five-year-old would dream about: processed sugar with a little bit of fizz, a little tingle of some distant fruit on his tongue.

"Hey hey!" said the woman. "Fifty cents!"

"Riel?" he asked.

"We don't want riel here. We want American."

Dooley was surprised and regretted all the cash he'd gotten changed in Phnom Penh. He gave her a dollar and she went to the back of her stall for his change.

The other hecklers decided he was easy now and trailed over with their own deals while he waited. The worst were the small children, five at the oldest, with their

postcards. They tugged at his touristy pants, the kind with all the zippers, and when he looked down they began their routine. They sold a set of ten postcards. They counted to ten, first in English, then French, Spanish, Italian, German. Not Khmer of course. Dooley wanted to walk away without his change, but didn't know if that were insulting. He patted one of the children's heads and she snarled.

“Don't be nice if you won't buy,” she said.

The woman came back with five dimes and a big toothy smile of her thanks. Dooley bowed slightly, instantly regretted it, and walked toward the temple gate, past which no locals could follow him.

The attendant outside took a look at Dooley's ID and offered to throw away the pink can for him. He gave it over sadly. It felt for a minute like some great souvenir.

He passed under the stone entrance. *A little bit to see before I go and help.* He didn't see anything that looked like an orphanage nearby, so he figured it must be at their second stop. Now, making his way toward the ancient stone set of stairs, which he assumed was the right place to go in the temple complex, Dooley thought of Alta. He closed his eyes and channeled her field of study. He wanted her to realize, somehow, that he was here.

Dooley walked to the pyramid of the temple, lichen-eaten and partially collapsed, but still even more imposing than the glossy full-page photograph in the guide. Every million bricks moved by hand. Every statue, every bas-relief chiseled by an artist, every few blocks detailed with ancient Khmer inscriptions or the image of a battle, of enlightenment. All mortared with sweat and mud. Majestic after—how long? a thousand years? Dooley realized he had no idea what, or who, these temples honored or were built

by. Were they even Hindu? He thought he had read Hindu, but wasn't convinced. He did not know anything except it was a wonder of the world, the massive complex of it all, the *kingdom*, and that he wasn't even near the famous temples.

He smelled incense from faraway. In the temples he'd visited with Alta, Hindus burned incense. Dooley decided he was right. He took some photographs and waded around in the stone piles, tentatively climbed the degenerate stairways—the Khmer must have had small feet and no vertigo—and nodded a satisfied nod to tourists he passed, he himself not a tourist.

Dooley emerged from the Bakong complex on the opposite side, because there was a monkey on that wall, and Dooley had never seen a monkey.

Alta left because Dooley's mother died. Not directly because of this, but that was how Dooley started remembering it. His parents had divorced when he was in middle school, his father both a world-renowned eye surgeon and a cheater. Dooley's mother got half the bank account. She never worked a day in her life. Then she died, not of anything to do with the eyes. She bequeathed her wealth to her only child. Dooley lied about the size of it to Alta. He told her five figures, and it had been seven.

When it came up, that the bank had mentioned it to her, thinking she was Dooley's wife, Alta asked why he could keep something so serious from her. He said he was sorry while he looked at his tenderloin. He didn't think it mattered, he told her. It was his money anyway, not hers.

She made a deep grunting noise and knocked a bowl off a table. He didn't deserve to be treated like this. He had emotions, he understood what it was like to feel hurt, or betrayed, but he was a good man and nothing was so bad that she should feel hurt or betrayed. It wasn't like he had lied. He just hadn't told her the heft of it. He knew maybe it was wrong when she asked him. He apologized then. He was supposed to get to sleep with her that night.

She told him calmly she would be leaving now, scooted out her chair and frowned. The telling mattered even if the money didn't. Dooley sat alone at the kitchen table.

On the other side of the temple, five local children stood in a line. An Indian woman was just outside the stone frame, listening to them. Dooley joined her.

“Hello sir, hello lady”—it was all said in three-quarter time, inflections unanimous and learned, by the five of them at once—“We are from the Preahatina orphanage and we are taking money to go to school. You can put it in the box. We have learned a lot in school and would please like to continue.” In three languages. “Bonjour sir, bonjour lady” they began again, as if in rounds, when an elderly white couple passed by.

They had a small stool and on it a tin box like the kind in poor Protestant foyers. They might have been ten or eleven years old. They had discipline, Dooley thought, and he greatly respected it. He wondered, would their orphanage be his place of work? Would they be his new favorite children, who would teach him strange folk games and practice

their hard-earned English with him in the shade of a banyan? He unceremoniously took the riel, which he now felt was useless but for donation, out of his pocket and dropped it in the slot of the box. He wished he had added the five dimes from earlier, just to hear that satisfying clang.

They clapped for him and said, all together: “Thank you, sir!” One girl gave him a blue and white pamphlet, printed in a nonsensical mix of Khmer and Chinese, but mostly English, about the purpose and needs of the orphanage and shelter system.

Dooley made a conscious effort not to bow.

Back in the tuktuk, Cesar gave Dooley a guidebook called SAY WAT? ANSWERS ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF ANGKOR. He flipped him to the Roluos section and found the pages on Bakong. *It is Hindu!* He inwardly gave himself a pat on the back. The temple was built in 881, probably four or five hundred years before the most famous temples, and this endeared it to Dooley. It was dedicated to Shiva, who he knew was one of the three Hindu big wigs, but Dooley couldn’t remember if he/she was the destroyer or the preserver. It was one of those things he should have known without having to know it, like how to snap his fingers or blow a bubble out of gum.

On the dirt road, they passed a cluster of dancing children. They had big spotted snakes draped across their shoulders and necks. “How much are snakes?” Dooley asked, without realizing he had.

“You cannot buy snake,” Cesar replied and dismissed the children with a wave. “Buy postcards.”

“Thanks.” Dooley moved toward the edge of his seat and dropped a few riel out the side of the vehicle. They were already long past the happy children.

“You want look at Lolei, too. Next stop.”

“Oh yeah, absolutely.” Dooley thumbed back to the Roluos section and found the temple. A single page.

Lolei had originally been built upon a manmade island, about a decade after the completion of Bakong. Its name was unclear in meaning. The temple was finished in a hurry, the kings eager to shift building efforts to the more important—now more famous—temples farther away at Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. It was used as an ashram, and *Today*, the book told Dooley, *it is more or less a monastery*. The guidebook suggested a ten-minute stay.

Hindu! Dooley thought. *Monks!*

Lolei was not as crowded as Bakong. There was only one souvenir stall, a shack with one of the low-lying hammocks and two tiny babies curled inside. The woman did not heckle him, but asked “Cool drink? Young coconut?” and she turned back to her babies when Dooley shook his head no.

“Mister,” Cesar said and motioned Dooley over to his motorcycle. “The monks are very smart.”

Dooley was pleased to hear this, but from the way his driver kept pointing at his temple and widening his eyes, Dooley got the impression that smart meant cunning. He nodded and made the same half-bow.

There were four sanctuary towers, all with scraggly brown grass atop them growing like unwelcome facial hair. It was impressive, of course, Dooley owed it to this country—the country with his heart—to say so. But it made sense to stay ten minutes.

Then Dooley saw the children.

They all looked sticky and contagious. They were probably ex-slaves, he decided. They stood at the back of the temple complex, six or seven of them, in what looked like a thatched-roof home.

Cesar was wrong! he thought. Here Dooley was, an orphanage.

“I have come to help,” Dooley said.

Now here he was, speaking to some orange-robed monks with leper-looking purple welts all over them. The poor, impoverished, ex-slave looking children jittered around their knees.

“Help!” echoed a child or two. “Help!” It was strange to hear this yelled with enthusiasm instead of despair. One of them even clapped.

The monks looked at each other, and one stretched out his hand. “My name is Arjun. Welcome to our school.” The name sounded familiar to Dooley, another of those things he should have known without having to know it.

“Is this an orphanage?” Dooley asked. He tried not to seem too excited.

“No,” Arjun said. “It is a school.”

Dooley looked down at the children. “How can I help?”

“Would you like to see my library?” Arjun asked him.

“Oh yes,” Dooley said, and one of the littler boys echoed him.

Dooley didn't remember what Cesar had said until they had already circled the building and entered a dark room cut from the brown grassy hillside. The library was not much of a library. It looked more like a bomb shelter with shelves.

“Welcome,” Arjun said and motioned grandly around the small dark room. There was a long table with computers—decent quality models from within the past few years—and a row of low bookshelves. There were two educational posters on the back wall: INSECTS OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS and CELEBRITY BIRTHDAYS: WHO IS YOUR TWIN? Dooley nodded his head slowly in an obligatory understanding. These children didn't even have the opportunities to learn about their own local insects or celebrities who spoke their own language.

But the computers, Dooley thought.

“You would like to see our books?”

“The computers,” Dooley said. “What about those? And then, how can I help?”

Arjun shrugged. “I'm a student at university at Phnom Penh. Well now I am not, because now I run the monastery school so maybe some of our children can go to university.” He made the sweeping gesture over the library once again. “This is the school with computers in the region. Only one. It would mean very very much if you could donate to our library.”

Dooley looked down. He finally noticed that one of the small boys had followed them into the library, quick and silent as a street thief, and Dooley instinctively rubbed at his pants pockets.

“But I came to help. What can I do for your school, Arjun?”

The silence was heavy.

“Donation?” Arjun asked.

The boy was staring up at Dooley. He reminded Dooley of Alta when they visited the temples together, a knowing and inwardly pleased face that signaled they *knew what was going on* and Dooley didn't.

Dooley kept his cool. He did not ball his white hands into fists and yell LET ME HELP, LET ME HELP, NOW GIVE ME PURPOSE. Suddenly, it came to him. “The Bhagavad-Gita. That's where your name comes from,” Dooley said. Alta had paraphrased it plenty of times, usually to prove she was right about some argument.

“Arjuna was the prince in that legend, yes. But Hindu. I am not an Hindu,” the monk said back, smiling.

Dooley reached into his pocket and dug around, trying to distinguish the dollars from the riel and unsure which he'd give if he did so. “I read this was a Hindu temple.”

“Fusion.”

“*Fusion?*”

Arjun laughed. “Buddhist and Hindu and Khmer and English. We are not worried about it.” He waved his hands again.

Not worried about it? English? Now Dooley was mad. They were speaking to him in his native language, all of them, even the four-year-old babies with the postcards at Bakong. Dooley had no one to teach.

Arjun was still smiling, his shaved head tilted to one side.

“Our children could always use more books here now.”

Dooley nodded. He was probably red in the face, his hands now tight spheres within each pocket.

“You will donate for books?”

Dooley tilted his head like Arjun had.

“Books!” echoed the small boy. Dooley had forgotten about him and the strange, conniving look on his small face. It had probably been more than ten minutes.

“It’s about time to move along, I think. My tuktuk is waiting on me.”

Arjun laughed like happy monks in photographs always seemed to, throaty and unembarrassed. The boy laughed with him. “But *we* have been waiting on *you!*”

Dooley could imagine Alta’s postgrad giggle, the one she’d developed in the middle of her thesis, the one that matched the know-it-all grin on this Cambodian boy’s face. He had let the “smart” monk lure him into a handover, and though it wasn’t much—*Of course it isn’t much*, Dooley thought—he was raw with anger that he’d fallen for it.

Arjun had taken his ten-dollar bill and his ten thousand-riel notes now. It was not a large donation. Dooley was grim-faced. He had let himself think that he could help, and no one wanted him to. They wanted his American dollars, and then his riel once he was

empty of the other. He wanted only to get back in his tuktuk, smiling and winking to let Cesar know he had not been fooled, and head back to Siem Reap, find a modest hotel with air conditioning, find an appreciative orphanage in the morning.

“Do not leave yet,” Arjun said. “I will go to my tent and get library guestbook. You cannot leave without your name in library guestbook.”

Dooley nearly lunged at the young monk.

Arjun darkened. “Please,” he said. “We pray for each visitors by name.”

Arjun walked out of the library. Dooley faced the row of computers, angry with them for existing in a place so far removed. He had not come to be guilted into giving. It was supposed to be straight out of the goodness of his bones.

Dooley was happy to finally be alone. He sighed loud and deep and bowed his head in embarrassment. He shut his eyes. This was not his world to alter. He would thank Arjun and he would leave, *Yes, that's what I will do*. He would begin again in the morning.

A sprinkle of laughter woke Dooley from his disappointment. He looked down to where the same small boy had apparently been waiting, giggling at Dooley's posture of defeat. He had that look like Alta, aware and proud of it, but this was more degrading, even worse.

Dooley flicked his arm out as hard as it would go and smacked the boy across his face. There was a soft thud as he folded backward onto the computer table, like the sound of a stone in deep water. His head cocked strangely and his eyes shut, calm.

Dooley looked down at his own arm. It was still hanging at the point of impact.

What?

He walked over to the boy slowly, not assuming anything; he wasn't even sure he had done it. Dooley knelt beside him at the computer table, meaning to lean over and shake the boy's shoulder, but something caught his eye. Beneath the table were all of the computer cords, free and snakelike, none plugged into anything. There was no electricity at Lolei.

Dooley grabbed the boy's shoulder roughly, and the boy fell forward, crumpling onto himself with a slow grumble. The back of his head was soaked in blood and the black knots of his hair were matting. Dooley did not want to touch the wound—it reminded him of the child hookers in the capital, their blood drive shirts and their needs. The boy's eyes were shut, but he was breathing.

I can save this child, Dooley thought. He had no preconceived vendetta against this child, against any child, against any of the monks or teachers or patrons of Lolei. He didn't consciously remember extending his arm like that, swatting anything, but muscle memory hinted *Dooley, Dooley, you did*. He would get this boy out of Lolei, to a hospital. He'd get him helicoptered to Phnom Penh, he'd find a Catholic hospital full of nurses wearing habits, dangling rosaries over dying children. As he thought this, he bent over and scooped up the boy, and didn't realize for a few moments that what he now held was dead. He scrambled for what he would say to Arjun. Could he give him money to hush the whole thing? Could he turn himself in and be pardoned for the recompense of his spirit? A crime of passion?

Then Dooley realized it might not be considered a crime of passion in this country. It would not have to be a crime at all.

The boy was wearing a set of robes nearly like that of the monks. Dooley quickly unknotted it in the back—he had helped Alta in and out of a sarong on several occasions—and fixed the fabric so it covered the boy’s crushed head like a hood. *I will carry him to an empty tent. When they find him they will not remember me.*

He picked up the little boy and held him, swaddled, like a newborn child or a bride—*Same thing*, Dooley thought—at first. Then he thought better and held him like a live child, butt on forearm, shoulder to shoulder. He covered the boy’s head with more fabric.

Arjun was nowhere in sight of the library door, and Dooley hurried out of it. There was a small group of tents and lean-tos off behind the temple and he headed that way, the boy barely an extra forty pounds in his arms. As he approached—*we?*—Dooley realized the place was full of people, mostly older women with babies in their arms. They didn’t stare at Dooley. He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t find an empty place to put the boy. There were tourists in bucket hats and vests at the spires. There was Cesar in the parking area, hawkers at their stalls. Arjun and the other monks were surely in the library by now, vowing never to pray for Dooley. Had they seen the blood? Were they after him? Dooley considered reruns he had seen on some travel channel on satellite TV, *Foreign Lockup*.

Crime of passion, he kept telling himself.

A woman came out of the tent and stood in front of him. “Who?” she asked, pointing a crooked brown finger at the bundle of a child.

“He fell asleep,” Dooley said. “Where can I take him?”

The woman said, “Let me see who.” She leaned in to take the boy. Dooley clung tighter and she lifted her gaze to meet his. She looked behind her. The other women were all laughing and talking; the children were tossing a small blue ball.

“Fifty dollar,” she whispered.

Why me, Dooley thought, why would it ever be me?

There was a clap like thunder in his head, not a clap like an enthusiastic child. Dooley imagined the temple spires were about to bow over on themselves, crumble the statues, ruin the fescue-looking long grass that dappled its bricks like fur.

I am not a pedophile, Dooley willed the woman to believe. What could he say? That this child needed him? His help? He was with Doctors Without Borders? They would want identification, a badge, at least a first-aid kit on hand.

“Fifty dollar,” she repeated. This time she raised her eyebrows and stuck out her tongue.

It was better to be a pedophile than a murderer, Dooley decided. *Crimes of passion indeed.* He leaned down to the most hidden of his touristy zipper pockets, careful to keep the boy upright, and forked out a fifty dollar bill.

She took it and half-smiled. Then she turned and went back to the children.

Dooley found Cesar at the tuktuk.

“Why stay so long at Lolei?” he asked, then he noticed the bundle. “Oh.” He would not look at Dooley. He pulled on his motorcycle helmet. Dooley got in the tuktuk seat, balancing the boy on his lap, the dead face snuggled against his neck.

“It isn’t what you think,” Dooley said quietly. Cesar surely heard but said nothing.

They took off down the narrow road, dust leaping at them, Cesar driving faster than before. Dooley did not turn to look back at Lolei. He imagined Arjun and a band of monks standing on the spires.

“I will only take you to Bakong,” Cesar called. “I have many things to do near Roluos. You take bus.”

Dooley did not know what he was doing. His options were to walk into the woods and dump the body, growing heavier by the moment, or take it back to some sleazy hotel in the city and do the same. There wouldn’t be a burial. There wouldn’t be charges pressed. But he had to get rid of it still.

“Right. Bus,” Dooley said. I AM NOT A PEDOPHILE, he wanted to cry. I HAVE COME TO HELP.

They passed Dooley’s discarded money in the road. They did not pass the children with the snakes. There was music playing somewhere far away, and there were parents dragging small children on pallets made of palm leaves. The daylight was stretching over them. It was beautiful, all of it. It was sights like these that he always talked about with Alta over dinner. These were the only reasons he had every come up with to go to a temple, to pray, to believe. But now, here he was holding a dead child like a live one, like a dear one at that.

At Bakong, Dooley overpaid Cesar. Cesar divided the money and gave back what he was not owed. He spat on the ground near Dooley's feet, a mark of finality more than of disgust. Their business was done. They did not shake hands or exchange parting wishes.

Dooley sat by the low wall of the temple. His arm was numb from the weight of the boy. The woman who had sold him the pink soft drink waved excitedly. The bus would take another few minutes, Dooley overheard. A German couple tried to ask him something but he shook his head, no Deutsch, no English. He rocked the boy back and forth a little. He almost forgot he was dead.

Dooley was the second person on the bus and headed straight for the last row of seats. He did not know if the body would begin to smell soon or if it would be overwhelmingly heavy by the next stop. Dooley set down the boy—such relief in his screaming forearms—and pushed him into the corner of the seat, his unflinching face against the window and Dooley finally free.

A man sat down across from them. He looked Mediterranean, elderly but fit, one of the many lonely retirees among the wonders of the world.

“Your son?” he asked Dooley, gesturing to the boy.

“No, no,” Dooley responded. He had forgotten not to know English.

The man's face turned a little frantic, as if he assumed the truth. He leaned across the aisle to Dooley. He smelled like dirt and olive salad and bad weed.

“How much was it?” he whispered.

No, Dooley begged. Please not this. No more.

“Permanent?” he asked. “Or just the afternoon?”

You could buy a child but not a snake.

Dooley didn’t know what to tell the man. “I’m getting off at the first stop at Siem Reap.” He fumbled in his pockets and found the pamphlet those grateful orphans had given him. “I came from Preahatina.”

The man’s eyes seemed to spread across his face. “Preahatina,” he repeated.

Dooley nodded and stared straight ahead. The man gave off a nervous excitement. It felt like he might start clapping or giggling at any moment.

The bus stopped in front of a barbecued ostrich stand, within sight of a main Siem Reap thoroughfare. Dooley leaned over and pulled the boy against his chest, stood, and made his way back up the aisle. The Mediterranean man sat upright and tried to see the boy, and Dooley might have imagined it, but he thought he heard “Preahatina” under the man’s bad breath.

Dooley hadn’t spent time in Siem Reap yet and expected it to be touristy, eager resorts on the main roads and Chinese restaurants in between them. Instead, he was surrounded by motorbikes in a parking lot, the smells of old fish and tempura mixing in the small nearby restaurants. He didn’t see any people who looked like tourists—no Koreans, no Russians, no Germans, no Hindis. Everyone looked like they could have been monks, or nuns, *or whatever*.

He was thinking too hard, he realized. This was not a time for observation. There was a dead child still in his arms, and Dooley figured he could start showing this at any moment.

“Hotel?” Dooley asked a biker in nice slacks and flip-flops.

“Big road,” he replied. “Not here for the temples.”

Dooley wanted to lay into this man. He wanted to drop the boy and fling his fists, crying that I DON'T GIVE A GOOD GODDAMN ABOUT THE TEMPLES.

He exhaled. “Not the temples,” he said instead.

The biker's friends were obviously waiting for him, teasing him in a language that didn't sound quite Khmer. He looked at what Dooley was carrying.

“I will not help you with that,” he said and he walked away.

Dooley found a two-story building with red and black shutters, alternating per window. One of the men selling barbecued ostrich had tapped him on the shoulder and brought him to the back of his stall. He got ten dollars from Dooley and pointed him down the poorly lit road to a hotel, he said, that “deals with that.”

Dooley expected syringes on the front steps or a cockfight behind the building. Instead, there was a lobby about as big as a closet and a square-jawed man with a book in his lap. The walls had a few family photographs hanging. There was a tip jar and a small gold bell. There was also a mirror on the wall, and Dooley saw himself: hair still combed, shirt still tucked into his pants. He looked fine except for sweat and the terrible thing he carried. The man looked up and noticed Dooley examining himself.

“Don't,” he snapped. “It does no matter.”

Dooley nodded and looked at the man. He could not form the words.

“A room,” the man said for him. “One night. Thirty dollars. Cash is good.”

Dooley reached into the pocket and found his last fifty. He got his change and his room key. The man went back to his book.

The room was on the second story. Dooley took the boy upstairs and dropped him on the bed. The robe came undone in one motion.

The boy was covered in dark brown freckles. He had small nude lips that turned up at one corner. There was a fat birthmark on his neck under one ear, the kind that he might have been teased for later in life. Dooley dragged his hand across the boy's dead arm, not quite tenderly, just to know how real he had been. Hindu. Khmer. Buddhist. If you stared at a little boy long enough, he started to look like God.

Dooley knelt on the hotel linoleum and realized he would not be punished. He balled up his fists, his knuckles whitened, and pressed them as hard as he could into the floor. He had ended the life of a child. He had paraded the body around just to come here, stretched out on a double bed meant for monsters. The boy might not even have been an orphan. His parents might be walking around the Roluos with Arjun looking for him. Dooley pressed his palms against his eyes until he was seeing bursts of color, color like he could not believe, and then he thought of Alta, how he could never explain this, how much he had wanted to help.

And then he thought of Alta, how she didn't even know he was gone.

We Did These Things Together

“I’m Blaise.” He knew that they knew that. “Curtis Reed’s brother.”

He shook the hands as they came at him, wide white grins that had surely sported braces, baseball caps facing frontward respectfully, facial hair scant and impeccable, all on faces that pleaded with him in some small and inward way. There were many young men to meet. After the empty, gripping hands came others full of bounty, offering imported stogies and imported beer, flat cans of dip, at some point a lighter. The hands connected somehow to those faces, but Blaise didn’t think of them in any cohesive way. The voices urged him to sit down. The hands did not urge him to sit down. He was receiving mixed messages. The handshakes made him nervous, like he should stand near a door or something, fixate on finding an escape route, but he’d been handed too many drinks by the time it got to the sitting, and an escape route felt laughably convoluted.

There were not many young men, despite how crowded the large room felt. He had been on campus for seventeen hours now and already knew five or six of the guys as Curtis’s friends. It was such an ordinary thing, this life, being offered gifts and resources, and connections later on, but Blaise felt tricked and new.

When he left the room later, Curtis was sitting outside Blaise’s dormitory, lazy and drinking whiskey out of a water bottle. Curtis wanted to know how it was.

“It was good. It was okay.”

“You oughta say what you mean.”

“It made me nervous.” Blaise sat down beside his brother, who passed him the water bottle. He kind of thought his brother was cultish when it came to his college—*their* college now, but no less cultish. The whiskey was good quality for college kids. Blaise wasn’t really surprised by that, which was the sort of thing Curtis really cared about, but he only took a sip.

“You meet Wells?”

Blaise couldn’t remember. Wells was the most important one, but they all looked the same with their half-centimeter scruff and raised eyebrows. He was the acting president of the brotherhood, who would have the most say about whether or not the group would want Blaise to join them, brother of a brother or not. Blaise had the prestige, the good breeding, the solid academic history. Did it take something else? Curtis had told everyone on the rural campus about him, that much was clear.

Over the summer, the Reed brothers had traveled through Canada with their parents. Canada was not South Carolina—Blaise wasn’t angry about the adventure, but rather about the climate and absence of resolute beaches and a never-ending supply of girls. They spent Canada recklessly, each day a flashback to the one before, fishing and hunting and hiking and drunk. Blaise thought maybe Curtis belonged there. Curtis woke up before the sun every morning, restless, and, as far as Blaise could tell, began the day’s family adventure by himself. It was a side effect of his school, Blaise figured, with its early morning duck hunts and dormitory gunrooms.

By noon, Curtis was always a few drinks deep. Blaise would meet him on the lake or at the head of a trail and Mr. Reed would come along in the afternoon, after finishing conference calls and brunch. Canada nights had been spent in lodge bars with Mr. Reed,

who had top-shelf taste. It was their last summer as a family, their father kept saying. Our last adventure, boys.

Curtis and Blaise maintained a notion of nostalgia for their father's sake, but they had not been affected by that finality. Maybe they would have their own boys someday to teach about fishing and hiking and the beauty of the unmapped world, maybe they would take those sorts of trips together as extended family, but maybe not.

Blaise's daily hour or so alone with Curtis disquieted the peace and promise of Canada. Every day, there was some new test of logic or agility or masculinity. And when Blaise could not accomplish these things—these binge drinking sessions or buck tracking races or the common sense quiz of how he'd talk to a woman, if one came out of the woods just then, naked and beckoning—Curtis taunted him, spilled a drink over him, twisted back his arm or shoved his face into a tree. The Reeds had had the same life, the same gun dogs and throwing knives, and Brown gave Blaise no excuse to fail his family.

Blaise had decided to leave Brown the day he got there. Something about the university felt forced, like everyone needed a particular direction, even the freest spirits still urged to move toward *something*, and he had no desire to be direct. His major was philosophy, but that didn't mean he knew anything. The only proof of that lay in his grades, which were perfect and said he belonged at Brown, so he stayed.

A year later, he went to visit his older brother Curtis at the tiny liberal arts college he attended in the woods of Virginia, whose name he could never remember. Curtis was only thirteen months older than Blaise, and they had always been close. Curtis majored in

journalism and wanted to work in D.C. Philosophy wasn't a favorite topic of his, unless it played into a new economic policy or some kind of government scandal. He entertained conspiracy theories with a vapidly intellectual enthusiasm and tested the tamer of these against Blaise's common sense. He usually did this only after a joint or so, and Blaise hated it.

Visiting Curtis, Blaise drove south from Providence and had no cell phone service. This was the first good feeling. He got out of his car at his brother's residence hall and was greeted by a group of calm young men who smelled of family fortunes and heirloom muscadine, but also of adventure. Blaise was intimidated for a few minutes but then fell in among them. This was the second good feeling. The pretensions on this campus felt different, almost earned.

Blaise was never comfortable, so Curtis had told his friends to be nice. This was the third good feeling. By the end of the weekend, Blaise had told Curtis he wanted to transfer south and finish the second half of his degree at his brother's college. There was no apparent pressure on any of the young men he met, drank with, and smoked with. They moved at a leisurely pace, but their school still had a solid reputation. Blaise moved to Virginia with Curtis in the fall.

Mr. Reed's face did not change when his son told him he was going to leave Brown. His large whitish eyes stayed wide, just like Curtis's, and he listened without judgment. Why yes, son, Brown is expensive. And you've done the hardest part already, you know. I think it could be good for you, to get your hands dirty down south. More south than Providence, anyway. And he chuckled.

Blaise knew the money wasn't an issue, and neither was the prestige. He was leaving a school of liberal thought for a school of liberal values put into action by hardworking young men—men, real men, not philosophers. His father was at least as proud of that as of Brown's reputation.

He had raised his boys with the subtle wildness of elitism. They built forts and shot each other with BB guns, the best kind of boys with the best kinds of hobbies, but they only played with each other. They grew up with land, and they felt entitled to it. Both boys were hard workers, didn't mind physical labor and did well in school, and they knew those things took time and effort. But they felt entitled to adventure, to freedom, to boyhood and then to manhood, and for the curing of that feeling Mr. Reed had seemed glad to send a son to Brown.

“Wells is the one with the dark, dark eyebrows.”

Blaise tilted the water bottle upward and closed his eyes to think and to handle the whiskey. He considered very carefully all the people he had met. He kept getting distracted by the hands attached to them.

“A little taller than us. Probably wearing a tie.”

Blaise thought hard but he couldn't place the dark eyebrows on a face in that earlier, crowded room. If Curtis would only describe the guy's hands, it would be easier.

Fraternal orders controlled the isolated campus, and Wells controlled the best of these brotherhoods. He and Curtis were friends on the grounds that they had to be, were brothers in a pledge class of only fourteen. These were upper crust men, raised to know

how to exclude people. Blaise wondered if Wells were heir to a medical supplies manufacturer or the largest pecan farm in the hemisphere. Both were rumored to be somewhere among the brotherhood.

“I’ll be honest: I can’t remember if I met him.”

Curtis took a second water bottle, this one nearly empty but for a swallow’s worth of tobacco spit, and put it to his lips, nodding. “He said y’all met. And he liked you.”

“How much is it going to suck for me to be in a pledge class with all these freshmen?”

Curtis gave the question adequate consideration. “It’s less of that than do you or don’t you want to join.”

“I do.”

“Then no worries, Blaisey.” They traded water bottles, and Blaise spit from the fat wad in his own cheek.

Pledgeship was the pre-initiation punishment of belonging to a brotherhood. The humiliation stripped a young man bare of his sense of self and resorted him to the long, kingly haul of becoming one of many and not his own. Blaise dreaded it. He’d heard the stories from Curtis, only because Curtis never thought his own brother would be subject to it, of the beatings and the forced binge drinking and the hot sauce smeared on testicles and the compulsory hits of acid. As his days and weeks on campus progressed, Blaise became an obvious heir to his brother’s chapter, and the prospect of pledgeship loomed heavy.

But that didn't demean the attention he received from the friends of Curtis, and at some point even from the president. Blaise met Wells at the unofficial house of the brotherhood, just off campus. Wells raised a set of thick eyebrows and identified himself.

"I'm Curtis's brother," Blaise replied.

"No name, huh?" He smiled so the question felt okay.

"Blaise Reed. Good to meet you, man."

"How's the semester, Reed? You worried about being a junior stuck with a whole bunch of greenhorns?"

Blaise didn't know how to answer. He was not worried, but uncomfortable. He shrugged and said, "I'm ready to have a bid, I guess."

Wells laughed. "Why didn't you say so, my boy?" he said, and handed Blaise a folded slip of paper.

"Blaise Reed?" There was a long silence as he got up and walked over to Wells. He and Curtis and three other seniors were seated on a long, high bench, paperwork in their laps. Blaise waited. "You are definitely what we want academically. What we need, I guess. Kudos there, Reed." It was unclear if he meant Blaise or Curtis with the last bit, so no one acknowledged the half-compliment. "Look, all right, Reed, the issue is what we're going to do with you. You're an asset, but we're not going to toss you into the freshman pledge class.... That would just be....*cruel and unusual*, don't you think? We think so. So, you know, the question remains.... What do we do with you, Reed?"

Now Blaise knew Wells was talking to him.

“We think it’s okay, and appropriate, for you to join the junior pledge class.”

Blaise zoned out, his happiness covered him up, he was free and flying and so glad not to be at Brown, to be here with his family and part of something—“But.” Wells and Curtis and the other nameless young men stared at Blaise.

“But what?”

“You’ll just be on your own, kind of. But at least it’s not pledgeship, right?”

Curtis would not meet Blaise’s eyes.

“We’re going to shoot coyotes together tomorrow, okay?” Wells shuffled the papers in his lap instead of looking at Blaise. “You and your brother and me.”

“Sure, okay,” Blaise said.

“Then we’re all set here. Just sign this.”

Blaise signed and left to sit with the freshmen.

When they left, Curtis caught up with Blaise and suggested they go get a drink or something and celebrate. They went to the faraway restaurant with the decent bar and Curtis offered to pay for whatever Blaise wanted, but their father would be paying either way. They both had whiskeys with water, just like they would if Mr. Reed had brought them to a bar in Canada, or in the Carolinas, or anywhere. The brothers laughed about the silliness of the pledging ceremony, but after a few extra drinks Curtis shook his head.

“Just don’t be nervous.”

The next morning, shaking off his celebration, Blaise dressed for class more comfortably than usual: khakis and a sweater he could stand to wear whenever Wells dragged him off to the woods. He was prepared.

Blaise stopped by the college's one cafeteria and made a fat plate of sausage and eggs. Wells sat alone at a table with one open textbook, which Blaise interrupted by joining him.

“You got a jacket, Reed?”

“Don't you call Curtis 'Reed' too? That might get confusing.”

“Yeah man, you'll need a jacket.”

Toward the end of the summer in Canada, Curtis led Blaise down an unmarked trail. There was a heavier evergreen canopy. Blaise couldn't hear any animals, or the gentle shrug of waves on the lake. It was steep.

Curtis was that silent kind of drunk Blaise rarely saw in anyone but his father or father's friends late at night. They stopped along the trail and loaded a bowl. Curtis gave Blaise a pat on the back. It was a peaceful anticipation—what would their new life together be like in its own wilderness? Was this a preview of adventure to come? Our last adventure, boys, Blaise could hear his father saying. But that wasn't true, Blaise thought, because adventure was all they were ever good at.

Blaise was a little out of breath: nothing too serious, the hill was just steep. But then his brother sighed and turned to him. “Goddamn it, Blaisey,” he said and threw a fist into his face.

Wells had a rifle bag over one shoulder and a cigarette hanging from between his thin lips, unlit. He wore his baseball cap backwards and shrugged on a backpack—distinctly

not for schoolbooks—as if to indicate a real adventure. He raised his dark eyebrows at Blaise, who was early.

“Thought I said four o’clock.” A small hound dog came running out of the side door of the fraternity house, followed by Curtis in an unbuttoned flannel shirt and his most worn jeans, looking like he had woken up only a minute or two prior. He put his own cap on and kicked at the hound.

“Whose dog?” Blaise asked.

Curtis looked him up and down and started laughing. “Jesus H Christ, Blaisey, go put on a pair of jeans. Jesus H,” he murmured. Wells laughed too and bent down to pet the dog, who was somewhere between puppyhood and maturity. He seemed untrained.

“Judd, ol boy, meet Blaise. You get to be in charge of Judd.”

Curtis went inside, returned with a pair of jeans, and Blaise stripped down in the sidewalk. Curtis also had a rifle, and a sweatshirt that he tied around his waist, and wore tall, rubber-lined, loosely laced boots. He and Wells were very different than the men they had been in the crowded rooms of their brotherhood bidding wars, making first impressions and outdoing each other. Blaise had started to notice the change subtly, but now here it was, manifest even in their wardrobes. The cigars had rolled themselves into cigarettes. The wine changed to cheap whiskey. The talk turned from what the fraternity could do for Blaise to what Blaise would be doing for the fraternity.

Blaise didn’t point any of this out. He was glad he didn’t have to carry one of the guns, until he remembered he was in charge of the unleashed dog.

“We used to have another dog, named Charles. Hell. We had a whole litter for a while, remember that, Wells?”

“I remember. Ha, shit, man, *that* was fun.”

“We had Charles and Jefferson and Benjamin and Scott. We thought that was funny as fuck to name them regular people names.”

“No girls?” Blaise asked.

Curtis shrugged.

“We usually just drowned the bitches,” Wells said. Blaise couldn’t think of a response. “Well, glad you’re early. Let’s have a drink.”

They set out within the hour after two or three watery beers apiece, Blaise’s sloshing in his unaccustomed gut. It was a hike and a half, from campus to the forest. Judd followed Wells closely and barked almost incessantly, but it didn’t seem to bother Wells or Curtis. The beer made the walk feel slower than it was, and Blaise couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to carry a backpack and rifle bag, too.

In twenty minutes, they stopped at the bottom of a steep, solitary hill. Wells and Curtis dropped the guns and knelt, pulling a rod of slim PVC pipe from the backpack. The idea of a trap had not occurred to Blaise; his brother and Wells were usually much more haphazard than that—he had imagined lying in the grass, drunk and firing the rifles whenever they heard movement past the treeline. After the piping came a small cardboard box, rustling and scratching sounds within. Blaise finally understood Judd’s frantic barking. Wells grinned.

“What exactly is the plan here?”

“You ever shoot something just to shoot it?”

Blaise had.

“All righty, Blaisey,” said Wells, “that’s the opposite of what we’re doing here today.”

Wells didn’t stop grinning. He jammed the long rod of plastic pipe into the ground and twisted, digging, until it stood up. Then, signaling for Blaise to keep his hands and attention on the distracted dog, one by one Wells dropped mice headfirst into the vertical PVC tunnel, more and more of them until Blaise had counted seventeen and Judd’s whine turned into more of a screech.

Wells tossed the cardboard box aside. “If you build it, they will come,” he said, and Blaise didn’t look up because he didn’t want to see Wells grinning.

They climbed the hill and sat down. Wells brought out a skinny flask from deep within the rifle bag, proffered it to Blaise first, then to Curtis, and took down a gulp. “Any old minute, my boys, it’ll be you and me and Juddy up here...and coyotes on coyotes down there,” he said, motioning down the slope.

“I thought you said we were shooting something with a purpose.”

Wells shook his head, amused and almost terrifying.

There was a weird silence.

“So, the piping...it’s a, uh, trap?”

“It’s Wells’s idea.”

“Bait.”

“Oh.” They tossed the flask to each other for a few minutes, silent, taking in the early evening air and warm whiskey. It tasted vaguely like pecans. When the flask was drained, Curtis reached into one rubber-lined boot and brought forth another. They

finished it by twilight and the first long heated howl of a coyote. Curtis cleared his throat as if this were his cue. “We come here and do this because we have to.”

The vague, cultish feeling flickered within Blaise.

Wells interrupted. “So goddamned dramatic, jeez. Look, Reed, you know that dank we’ve been smoking?”

“I haven’t smoked it with you.”

“Well, whatever, I’m sure Curtis has told you all about it. The point is, we’re broke college kids. Decent weed is not just something we can buy on allowance. So what’s our nice little college town got that nobody else has got? That’s right, yep, too many fucking coyotes.”

Blaise didn’t understand. He waited. They were drunk.

“It’s an even fifty dollars a head—the bounty system,” Curtis clarified. “So one pair of ears equals an eighth of good.”

“Fifty dollars?”

“Population’s swollen. They’re messing with the farms and shit.”

This was why they had come to the hillside: to kill coyotes, to turn in trophies for a price, and to get high later for all their effort. Maybe it was cultish, or maybe it would start to make sense, Blaise didn’t know. He was a little proud of his involvement.

“Last one,” Curtis said, pulling a third flask from his other boot.

The evening got cooler as the boys warmed up.

“You ready to realize how this all gets complicated?” Curtis asked. He and Wells held a reverent moment of pause, looking around the darkening hillside.

Blaise nodded. Curtis began a story about some kind of demonic presence in the woods or some other adequately inexplicit terror, and Blaise zoned out into a haze of the nutty whiskey and the beers that came previously and the mice stuffed in the pipe in the valley. What he gathered was the haunt of a supernatural element of this wilderness that the boys had to outwit to get their bounties. Blaise wanted to laugh in their faces, or maybe throw up.

“...and that’s why we drink beforehand, you know? Get a little more courageous.” Wells let out a whoop of approval at Curtis’s telling. Curtis and Wells had no competitors in the world, no rivals, no possible conflicts, so they had to invent their own. Curtis mentioned how much he’d like to smoke a bowl real quick, and Wells looked at him hard, without grinning.

If liquor is measured in fingers, can drunkenness be measured in fists? Wells hit Curtis hard in the back of the head, and Blaise watched without saying anything. Judd leapt at the sudden motion—Blaise had forgotten the dog was there at all—and out of nowhere Wells had the rifle out of the bag and the Reeds were unarmed, unprepared, not in any way conscious enough to compose themselves for this unexpected cruelty. But the shot that rang made its way down the hillside, and Wells let out another war whoop of success. He sprang to his feet, still aiming the gun, and Judd ran toward the treeline.

“Get the dog!”

Blaise lurched forward, suddenly aware of just how out of his mind he was, underwater in gun and cigarette smokes mingling, and hoping that Judd was not gone. As he moved sickly, Wells headed the opposite direction, down the hillside, firing at random.

“What the fuck, Wells?” Curtis called, finally getting up and moving safely away from the gun, toward his brother and the trees. They ran, all three of them—brothers and dog—away from Wells. Judd ran to Blaise, *maybe that was affection*, and Blaise scooped him up. He and Curtis made their ways tentatively back to Wells once the shots stopped firing.

“Shit. I’m tired,” Wells said as he bent to sit. He slung the rifle off his shoulder and onto the ground next to him. “Sit down, Reeds, let’s have a break.”

Curtis and Blaise looked at each other, obviously appraising the worth of Wells’s request, and followed suit. No one spoke—Wells was out of breath and the Reeds were out of their elements. It felt very real.

“Who’s cold?” Wells asked.

“It’s getting chilly,” Curtis said, and Blaise nodded.

“Let’s warm up then, boys!” He sounded like an old man with real authority. He reached around to his gun case—Blaise half-expected there to be a fourth skinny flask inside—and pulled out a plastic baggie, tied tight around a pre-rolled blunt. Curtis perked up a little bit. They were already lightheaded and warmer than they should have been, from the whiskey, but if Wells wanted to smoke they would share.

The blunt reeked. Wells grinned and lit it.

Judd was doing a funny little trot around the boys on the hillside, and they started laughing at it terribly. Wells had the strangest eyebrows, Blaise could tell in the warm glow of the lighter against the small cigar, but he was a good-looking guy and surely this

was all that the night would be, the three bonding over Blaise's wise move from Brown to their own small world of inebriation and success. Curtis could barely open his eyes, those wide eyes that looked so much like the senior Mr. Reed's, and he just smiled and smiled like there was nothing else he could do but enjoy himself. Blaise had a feeling of some kind of symmetry, that all was right in the world and that the evening might just have aligned itself with a higher purpose, another long, free night for Curtis and Blaise, and Blaise held true in his insides that Canada would not be their last adventure.

It was silent and Judd was gone. Deep in his brainstem, Blaise realized he couldn't remember the past half hour. It was like waking up in a motel, sticky with sweat and disoriented. Curtis was slit-eyed but not smiling anymore. Wells stood and surveyed the valley.

"Okay, we need to grab the coyotes," Curtis said. He was concerned. "Like, we have to."

"No, man, we need to just chill the fuck out for a few more minutes."

"I'm serious, let's go get the ears and get back to campus. It's going to get dark."

It was already dark.

"Curtis. Trust me. We need to be chill."

"How high are we?" Blaise interrupted.

They'd forgotten about the little brother and he startled them.

"We need to stay here till Curtis gets normal."

Blaise moved toward his brother, who appeared normal enough, and his whole body flashed with needle-like electricity. The heat was unbearable under his skin, his fingers and toes were not even there, he couldn't feel them if they were, and he slumped into half of a pile next to Curtis.

Wells was kicking him the next time Blaise came conscious. Wells had vomit down the front of his nice blue shirt and Curtis was not beside his brother.

“Where for fuck’s sake is the dog?”

Blaise fought his own gag reflex. Something was not right with his condition, beyond the obvious answer. “And where’s your brother?”

“What the fuck did we just smoke, man?”

Wells walked off to a better vantage point, to survey their scrawny bounties at the bottom of the hill. He got back in his habit of grinning after a minute, apparently enjoying the brazen tingles that made Blaise feel like he was a cloud housing a lightning storm. Curtis was probably kneeling next to the dead coyotes and hacking off their ears to present to the county game warden. The high felt like a low, too much gravity and an undeserved heat. It seemed doubtful that he could crawl or cough or do anything but twist around in discomfort. The hillside moved underneath Blaise, churning and kicking him and threatening to buck him down the slope, but he fought as hard as he could and remained visibly level.

“That was a fry blunt,” Wells said, carefully eyeing Blaise’s exaggerated movements.

“A what? What’s wrong with us right now?”

“Where’s Curtis, man? Where’d your fucking brother go?”

Blaise watched Wells melt into a pile of pure heat, wavy like mirage. Blaise fell back onto the burping earth and leaned over to vomit, narrowly missing his decent sweater, then looking up once more to see the dark sky flashing vivid and every color he could think of. It didn't make sense. What did fry mean, aside from Blaise's direct connotation of the electricity shooting through him, from his toes to his retinas to his hair follicles?

Blaise scrambled to his feet, but it took a lot longer than it should have. "Curtis!" he cried. *Everybody leaves.* He knew this.

They hadn't heard Judd in minutes either. Blaise kept thinking he saw Judd, under the pressure of the bright whiteness, but the dog was nowhere near them. Fry was a term he'd heard before, in two years at Brown, but Blaise couldn't place what it meant. Had it been laced with syrup, cocaine? He wasn't sure it mattered, because Wells was back and had Blaise's arm in his grip, dragging him down the steep black hillside.

Blaise could not tell if the animals were dead or alive. There was the low moan of injury, but mostly there were just trees and two textured silhouettes on the ground. Wells murmured "Here," and pressed a knife from his backpack into Blaise's hand. It was cold against his fevery skin, and Blaise didn't know what to do with it.

"What do you want?"

"How fucking hard is it, Reed? Get your goddamned hands dirty."

Blaise thought of his father, who had used the same words when encouraging him to leave Brown. He knelt near the first coyote, far enough away so that none of the mottled gray could touch him, and reached tenderly toward its ears. It stank, either from its life or from its death. Blaise could just make out the teeth in the dark, and he realized

that they were clattering. It was alive, if barely. Blaise took a startled breath and scooted away, doing his best not to heave. Wells kicked Blaise back toward the coyote.

“You don’t have to kill it, you pussy. Just get the ears.”

Blaise’s was uncertain. His hands were not his own. He leaned forward, made a cold swift sawing motion, and came away with an ear. The animal did not howl, but whined quietly. “Please,” Blaise said. “Would you just kill it?” His hands were warmer now, bloody and somebody else’s.

“One down, three to go,” said Wells.

Blaise didn’t have anything to say to that. He tried to balance the amount of time he focused and sawed and pretended not to hear growling with the amount of time he kept his eyes shut against the terrible, false things he saw as well. He vomited again. Wells made some successful howl, and Curtis was still missing, so Blaise moved away from the tragic hunting grounds. He had no authority here: Wells did, maybe Curtis could have helped if he had been there. What he would give to be in his apartment in Providence. Blaise staggered off—his eyes still closed, half-crawling, half-running, until he knocked into a tree—and got away from Wells.

Blaise woke up again, not sure how he’d fallen asleep, with spittle all over his mouth and chin. It was the blackest kind of night, probably three in the morning. He did not know who or where he was, but there were trees.

Then he remembered exactly who he was, or maybe it was Curtis he remembered. Whichever, he didn’t like it. He didn’t like the child-sized tree stands that he had always

thought were treehouses, he didn't like the land and the hunting dogs, he didn't like this dark place in the woods. He had lost his opportunity to be pretentious when he left Brown. He had given it up to come back to this, an overgrown sense of immaturity and entitlement.

Alone, Blaise heard some kind of whooping that didn't sound entirely animal, and he leapt to his feet. The tingles of the fry were at a point of regularity, timing-wise anyway. Nothing was regular about the way those jolts made him feel. He wanted to find Curtis more than Wells, but one was better than neither, so he followed the aching sound to its source, where Wells lay and Curtis stood, triumphant.

“What happened?”

“Do you understand what the fuck we smoked, Blaisey? Do you get that at all? Whatever happens, or happened or what the fuck ever, it can all be blamed on that. On Wells.” Blaise didn't say anything. “*Do you realize what we just smoked?*”

“Fry.”

“Do you even know what that is?” Curtis's face was red and puffy and purple, and after focusing in the night Blaise could tell that it was also bleeding. He was hysterical, sobering up surely, but incoherent.

“I just know I don't want to ever smoke it again.”

Curtis didn't laugh. He looked down instead and started muttering quickly, more distressingly than the silent sulky drunkenness of Canada. Then Blaise remembered that Wells was unconscious at their feet and he knew he could not ask again what had happened.

“When we were sophomores, with the dogs—” Curtis said. He huffed a little and continued. “He made me drown every bitch in the litter. Then he shot the mom.”

Blaise waited.

“‘You every shoot something just to shoot it, Reed?’ That’s what he asked me. I said yeah man, all the time. He said he had, too—liked shooting pecans out of trees when he was a kid.” He looked at Blaise with big eyes like his father’s. “But I hadn’t, not like that. We were such good friends that he offered me the shot.” The moment ended. Curtis shook his head and muttered. “I’m going to go get those coyote ears, Blaise, and you’re going to wait the fuck here.”

To Blaise, the Canada sky looked beautiful. He thought he could gaze up at it forever, if forever was how long it would take him to stand. Toe by toe, limb by limb, Blaise checked to see what was broken, what was bruised, and what was intact. Mostly he seemed intact.

But then there was his face. He couldn’t blink or open his mouth. There was hot blood—he guessed blood anyway—in his mouth, but he didn’t think he could swallow. He sat up, the pain in his sides and his head ridiculous. Curtis gave him a final set of kicks to the abdomen then walked away up the path, his footsteps light but audible. There was the sound of vomit. Blaise wondered if his brother would remember later the screech of a hand hitting bone.

Blaise focused hard, and from this strange high point on the trail it was obvious that the lodge wasn’t far. It was bizarrely close; was he dragged here? The patio lights were short steps away. He closed his eyes against the hot pain and saw his Providence

apartment, the peace of a life unobserved. He opened his eyes to see his father on the patio, watching, down to half a cigar.

Curtis walked off. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck, fuck. Blaise bent over Wells, or whatever this thing was that reminded him so much of Wells, and patted him on the chest, unsure about the purpose of doing so, just unable to sit without doing anything. *Will I be the only one to come back from this?* He wondered all the wrong things while he should have wondered how to fix or help Wells. Why wasn't Blaise concerned? He had reasons to be, especially now that Curtis had left him once more in the handhold of the drug and its lazy electricity, now that Wells was just this heap at his feet, now that Judd was gone and surely for dead, now that he wouldn't graduate among the Ivy League.

Then Wells coughed. *A death rattle?* Not quite. He started heaving in a weird way, and Blaise flipped him onto his side so he wouldn't choke on the spit-up. Curtis was guiltless; Wells's condition could only be blamed on the malice of some woodland attitude, not on his friend and fellow pledge, his brother.

“Wells?”

It didn't matter that Curtis had just beaten Wells to a bloody pulp—to death as far as Blaise could tell—in a way that felt all too familiar. Blaise wanted to think about their set of identical treehouses, their child-sized waders and rubber boots, all of these tender, faraway things morphing into fishing rods and Canadian draft beers and their last days as a family, as brothers.

He shouldered the burden of his high—embalming fluid, that was it, fry; that was why the carefully constructed blunt had reeked. Embalming fluid. It somehow felt fitting for how much it had hurt.

And Wells's eyebrows, too dark for his hair, too heavy for his features, a burden in a way that no young man of his standing could deserve but at the same time a distinction in the bravest and best ways. They were soaked along with the rest of his forehead, a shuddery fever dream—*or maybe just a fever?*—of some kind of illness that Blaise had neither the knowledge nor patience to diagnose. And despite the imminence of what looked and smelled like Wells's death, Blaise couldn't help but find his worries making their way to Judd, and how the boys had just abandoned him like that. The little dog was gone, probably attacked by some spared coyote, and Blaise was worried about him, not his master.

Maybe he was entitled to the pecan farm, to adventure, to tacking on “the Third” to his legal name, to daddy's influence and buildings on a college campus bearing his farfetched legacy—but Wells was not entitled to living. There was a shudder, maybe the last tingle of a deep-fried and partially embalmed inebriation; but Blaise would never know what it was, and for that he was more than grateful.

Then, a movement where there had been none. “You fucking snake,” Blaise said to it.

“Everyone leaves, little Blaisey Reed, didn’t daddy teach you anything?

Everybody leaves you.”

“You aren’t even real, are you?” He couldn’t tell if Wells were really talking or if the fry had electrified a wordless, lifeless thing and made it dance.

“Little Blaisey Reed.”

“Why don’t you ever answer me?”

“Blaisey Reed.”

“Fuck you, man, fuck you.”

“Blaisey.”

“Get away from me.”

“Blaisey!”

“You snake.”

“Blaise.” It was Curtis. But it felt like someone else.

In Canada, the Reeds were never pressured to enjoy themselves. Not our last adventure, never our last adventure, they thought, (because Blaise would leave Providence for the farmland college), and we will always, somehow, be together to do things like this. We will reprimand each other whenever we act like this is not what we wanted, will say to each other that this adventure is all we have; this moment of inconsistency and unknowable-ness is exactly what we asked for. We got what we wanted, and if we ever doubt or debate this, we will come to blows and see who, if either of us, will remain. When that happens, we will congratulate the remainder, the one who has come out on

top, and we will know that in a wilderness built of boyhood plans and the time it took to reach adulthood, that no one but us could come out on top. They could have come—any of them could have come. But they will all leave, one by one, with the failures of the adventures that competed with ours, and it will be us, just us, always and only us, breathing like we were born to do just that and remaining, and staying true, staying blood beyond any other bond, staying true, so true, to each other, except when we can't, and when we can't we will come apart and forget what it was that bound us.

In the Auditorium

We're so stoned and the damn Tabernacle Choir's just got here. Matty and his brother have us our seats saved in the middle of the auditorium, Matty because he's just got off probation with the college and his brother because he does what Matty tells him. Ted is looking out the weird window by the storage closet in the lab, where we are, Yeah we've got six or seven minutes guys. And so we shed a thin layer of Lysol into the lab—nobody will notice cleaning supply smells in the chemistry lab, Harvey's a fucking genius—and grab our coats and walk out into the hall.

Ben Forester is in the front of course, Future Business Leader of America Ben Forester, and he's got us all riled up about how shitty this assignment is—this, our own Friday night in Memphis, Beale a dream you could sell yourself on when your parents say yes, son, Christian college it is. We aren't really mad that we have to go to the concert, you know, that's okay, but it's one night only and so is the girls' college mixer, and we can't leave early because Dr. Turncote's taking tickets at the door. Goddamn, Dr. Turncote!

So now we're nearly outside Carton Hall, the place Harvey swears he made one of the professor's daughters a woman, and at first, in the hallway, we shrugged that maybe we weren't really so high, but when we hit the wall of winter air outside it's obvious we will be too high to make the tail-end of the girls' school mixer. Dave and Darwin Adams start laughing at some twin-brainwave they've just had and in laughing

Dave stumbles, which leads all of us to the same kind of comatose laughter. Ben Forester doubles over, his scarf brushing the packed campus ground, his high-pitched squeal our own private Tabernacle Choir. We've got no idea what we are carrying on about by the time we reach the auditorium, apparently with only two minutes to spare, and Dr. Turncote gives us a necessary nod of approval that yes sir we sure have come to get our goddamned class credit. Ted says he'll look for Matty and Matty's brother, secure our seats in time not to cause a scene. But Dr. Turncote tears the last ticket, Darwin's, and opens the door to the auditorium and all any of us can manage is What the fuck? which comes from Ben Forester.

There are only Matty and Matty's brother in the middle section and a strange gaggle of other forced students scattered throughout the back of the auditorium; nobody else has come. Dr. Turncote has tears somewhere hidden beneath those thick-ass glasses of his, later Dave says he's sure about it, but how can anyone be sure of anything in life if nobody shows up to see the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? Harvey doesn't react well to this and starts laughing like he's nuts, like he wants the whole place to know we've just smoked two blunts and a half, like he wants to sit in the middle section like we're some kind of fan club for the Mormons, like maybe he wants to give the impression that we're Mormons ourselves.

The Mormons do not say anything about how our campus is Catholic, only Thank You All for Coming Out on This Cold Winter Night and Thanks Again and Enjoy the Show. They start into this first song and we're a little spaced, future business leader of America Ben Forester's definitely thinking about the girls' mixer and the girl he refers to as You know, just ripe enough—to pluck off the vine of her virtue. She sounds pretty but

then again they all do if you never make it to their mixers. So it takes a minute or two for us all to even realize they're singing to this big empty mouth of a room, that no one has come to see them by choice, and when the song is over no one claps. No one does anything at all. Dr. Turncote claps, but that's only more depressing. So all of a sudden we start clapping, too, one by one except that Matty's brother starts at the same second Matty does. It feels good to clap, slapping one primitive tool against another and feeling the sting of appreciating something enough to hurt your own hands to recognize it. There's an itchy feeling somewhere inside the clapping, and a wide heaviness to the distance we spread our arms. It's so refreshing, actually, that Harvey and Ted clap a few seconds longer than anybody else does, and it's awkward in a strange mocking rhythm. We burn with embarrassment.

But it feels so good, far too good, to clap for those motherfucking Mormons that the whole time of the second song we're waiting for it to be over, we're ready to reward their sweat under the interrogating lights of our Catholic auditorium. And when the last note is sung we howl. We call to them with thanks, a reason to hammer our academic hands like workingmen. Dr. Turncote claps with us, and he seems pleased because now we've got it a little more figured out, now it doesn't sound like mockery or indulgence but rather like we love this choir, and we never want to hear anything else. But that's not it, sadly, it's just that we are selfish and we are loving the worth of our clapping. These Mormons need us! They'd be sad were we not here, they'd be heartbroken and they'd have hard feelings against the Catholics, and Ted makes it clear that we're doing our part to preserve the status of the Church.

So the third song rolls around and we sit again, worn out from the applause, Harvey and Darwin both shimmering with sweat, Ben Forester yanking off his scarf with a sigh, our coats dropping to the backs of our folding chairs. Matty and Matty's brother aren't even high, we realize, and they are breaking down just the same. We settle back into the music, ready to eat up our chance at eternal goodness once more.

But then, the music. We roll up our sleeves, pretending not to be affected, we look at one another hoping someone else's eyes might distract, but it's not going to happen, suddenly there are globs in the foyers of our eyes, there are tears, none yet falling but all rolled up like strategic boulders. They're singing us, Ben Forester says, They're fucking singing us Ave Maria—

—and they are! What for fuck's sake Mormon bows to a Catholic college with one swift note of Ave goddamn Maria? We are war-whooping and foot-stamping and trying our best not to stand and dance, because then whose view would we block but Dr. Turncote's? We are ruining their song, but it's perfect because their song is sanctifying us, and we are nothing if not the happiest we have been for anything, happier than if we were to pluck and juice every vine-ripened virgin at the girls' college, happier than if we were the highest-paid graduates this side of Memphis ever saw.

And it ends, and as it ends we are weeping. Ted weeps the most, Matty a close second, and we cannot accept that there are twelve more songs to come. We want to shove the Mormon Tabernacle Choir away, tell them please to go and never come back, that this was an assignment and not what we'd bargained for. If not this, we want to run for the exit sign, but goddamn if Dr. Turncote wouldn't catch and fail us. We are blind from tears and exhaustion, and we're pretty sure Dave has fallen asleep on one aisle,

driven to sleep by the good weed and the goodness in us all. And then, the Battle Hymn of the Republic—Fuck me if it's not the Battle Hymn of the Republic, Harvey says—and we are knocked backwards, nearly into orbit, by the truth as it marches us over, by the song as it mows us down.

The Favorite

I'm sleeping all the old ways. Elbow cocked sideways and the smooth inside-skin pressed against my eyes, wrist on the pillow, palm to the ceiling, fingers barely grazing the headboard. This is debatably why I've gotten carpal tunnel, why every boyfriend I've ever had has been driven away by my nightly question during the nightly news: Would you massage my wrists and forearms, please?

And in my childhood bed. The walls are covered in so many terrible collages of supermodel magazine cutouts and summer camp swimming pool photos of me. I want to be one of those adults whose parents have moved on, sized down on a golf course across town or turned the child's bedroom into a fitness studio or bowling alley. My room is like those of the disappeared kids you hear about, Jonbenet and all them with their soft dead baby skin, preserved like an exhibit in case they ever come home. I've begged my parents as subtly as possible to forget about me, focus on themselves, but they cannot. They still take dinner guests up to my room and show them swim team medals, my scholarship letters, my diploma, and they point out the painting of Saint Michael the Archangel because at the age of seven I had picked it from a poster sale myself.

My parents called me on Wednesday to tell me what had happened to Bridgely, then asked if I'd do the favor of calling Esther, how they didn't think they could handle having to say those words again. I almost made them, almost told them I could not, then rescinded and considered sending Esther an email. I called her several hours later, after I

had a vodka drink and three beers. She reacted like I was a polite telemarketer, the kind you excuse yourself from with hasty discomfort.

Lights still on, I move my hands down to my sides where they belong. I can't believe I'm sleeping like this, doing it again in my outgrown bedroom. I look around to see if there are any pictures on the walls of me with Bridget, or me with Esther and Bridget, or just one of Bridget that I might have thought was beautiful. She was the middle child, so naturally the most beautiful, and too smart and too capable to be called Bridget.

There's one on my desk in a frame.

Bridget is sixteen in it, maybe, and her hair is in tight white-blonde cornrows, weird as all hell, but of course. She is on a beach somewhere wearing denim. She died in a motorcycle accident. In Singapore. We didn't even know she had a motorcycle.

Breakfast is links of sausage and pancakes with almond spread, orange juice and coffee and two different options for creamer. My hands are not sore, thank God. My dad is at the refrigerator contemplating expiration dates. My mom is sitting down, wet spots shining on her face. Esther is buttering her plate. We all look so well rested, rosy-cheeked and wearing bathrobes or pajama sets (Dad), that you might think this were Christmas morning if you didn't look too hard at my mom.

"Bridget always loved pancakes," she says with a soft sigh.

"She did not," Esther says.

Mom looks at her, eyes wide.

“She always ate toast and cream cheese for breakfast,” Esther says. “Even when you guys made quiche or casserole.”

“With salt and pepper,” I add.

Mom looks like she did not know this. Bridgey was thirty-two this year, and Esther’s right, she never really cared about breakfast. She spent all her money on airline tickets and train passes and, once, a small gray horse that she tried to ride through the Andes. I still sometimes wonder what she named it.

“The service went well, don’t you think?” Dad asks. The refrigerator door is still open.

“Yes,” Mom says. She is crying again. We’re eating on fine china, the off-white set with the gold lacquered trim. Esther and I had once argued over who would get to take it to their own house and their own family someday. Bridgey had sat at the table laughing at us.

“You know,” I say. “I’ve got to head out kind of soon. But everyone at the office sends their thoughts and prayers.” Melinda had gotten the hygienists all to throw in for a bouquet. It was a weird shade of peachy pink, peonies maybe—too romantic-looking for death—but I’ve never known much about flowers. Lola at the front desk had called me, her throat that choky way like she knew her own share of grieving. One of those four-minute phone calls you could never learn how to take.

Esther frowns. “Well I can be here another couple days. They gave me the week.” She is the managing accountant for a chain of bakeries and gourmet stores in Kansas City, and they sent their own condolence cakes and funeral pastries. Our parents usually mention me first, saying oh yes, Molly, our youngest, the orthodontist, not Esther, the

smarter one, oh yes, bakeries. When they bring cocktail hour guests up to my bedroom, they always point out a few pictures from when I had braces. They probably laugh about how I can relate to kids, how tender my approach must be, my teeth all mangled and desperate in high school. But not how Bridgey's were so much worse.

Mom puts a hand on Esther and one on me. "We understand, Molly. But we are so glad we've had you this long. Esther, that will be wonderful. You've both been so strong and so good."

Who knows what to say to something like that? I start wondering if they are secretly proud of the rigor of my workload, or secretly proud that Esther had found a way to stay. My mom gets up and starts the dishes. Esther smiles at me, and after breakfast I leave.

Wesley was my first real boyfriend. From college onward, it went like this: Wesley, Conner, Whit, Toddy. He slouched terribly but wore impeccable suits and had a briefcase. He was an on-campus tutor, a Master's student coaxing undergrads like myself through essay writing and rhetorical strategy.

We ran into each other at bars and restaurants, then started going to the same ones together. He massaged my arms before we slept together the first time. I didn't think my parents would like him, the relative age gap and all—twenty-seven to my twenty-one—but we met up with Esther one night before she moved to Kansas City, her last hurrah of sorts with all of her high school friends. Wesley didn't know anyone, and aside from obligatory hugs and noogies from the oldest of them, I didn't either. We were alone at the

bar, his bourbon and my vodka-soda-lime, when Bridgey came and popped down beside us.

She was in her first year out of college—had managed a summer wilderness skills course in Canada and was passing through on her way to Mexico, a rendezvous point with an ex who wanted to see her again. Wesley had only heard a word or two about Bridgey before, when I told him the story about the horse in the Andes with the funny name, but he listened to her latest story with his mouth open, silent.

She didn't stay at the get-together long. After her two Modelos and her quick kiss to Esther, she left with a wave and Wesley suggested we leave, too. For days after he claimed he was drunk when he said it: "Holy shit, your sister is incredible."

After that, it didn't make sense to me. I told him maybe we should quit while we were ahead. He eventually added Bridgey on Facebook, they met up a couple times when she passed through. His presence in her life was inconsequential. But he always liked having some claim to her. When he came to the funeral, he probably told friends at his new job in Waco that they were close. Maybe that she was the one he dated. He probably grabbed that grief as his own.

My house in Alamo Heights is bigger than it should be, but I wanted a red tile roof and a pond, which naturally single people don't need. Five days worth of mail is stacked neatly on the counter, by Angel, the same lady who has come and fed the cat. She left a post-it note of condolence: *Lo siento—and Maya has been very good. I poured out the milk that curdled.*

I get home in the afternoon, shower and brush my hair, drop by the office for a consultation that I've already rescheduled twice. The poor girl is nine, her incisors coming in at all the wrong angles, and Gina shows me x-rays that aren't the best news in the world.

I get dinner after it with Gina, the only office staff member that I would consider my friend, the only one who doesn't seem to bow slightly under the weight of the word *Doctor*. We have margaritas, then tequila shots, and before I know it I'm complaining about Toddy, and Conner, even shithead Wesley, how they came to my own sister's fucking funeral and didn't even bother to call. Gina asks how I'm feeling, calls me a cab, but when I excuse myself to the bathroom I get lost in the murky hallway and find the parking lot. What can it hurt, I wonder, and I fumble with the lock of my car.

I make it home, the streetlights dizzying and almost accusatory, the highway all zigzagged like in dreams. My cat has shit on the floor. I had planned to call my parents before bed, check in with them and tell them I love them and then ask to talk to Esther, to thank her for the extra time she'll get to spend at home, the time I could not have sacrificed. Instead I eat a sandwich on a hot dog bun, lots of mayo and mustard, some lettuce, deli sliced chicken from Publix, whole cherry tomatoes. I add butter for good measure. Maya purrs at me with something like disapproval. My bed seems excited to have me back after this long awkward week, and I fall into it in my work clothes and pearls.

But she comes that night ringing bells. There is one in each hand, the kind we used in elementary school music class, and she shakes them to no rhythm, unsurely.

“Bridgey?” I ask, waking to realize that my wrist has found its way above my head again, the elbow covering one of my eyes, the sleeve of my workday blouse scrunched against my eyelid. I move my arm away and try to blink myself to familiarity after so many nights in my high school bedroom. There is a soft taupe wallpaper here, crown molding. No pictures of me on the walls.

“Bridgey?” I ask again. Then I’m embarrassed.

There she is, her whole form gauzy like a hologram. Her white-blond hair flows from her like there’s wind. She is sitting on the foot of my bed, a painted wooden bell in each hand.

Even in her life, Bridgey and I were not close. While I was taking SAT prep and heading different service organizations, she was two years my senior, didn’t have many friends in high school, and left for college with no plans except to save up enough money for at least two semesters abroad. Esther was already at the University of Michigan—*yes, strange*, our parents told their cocktail friends, *but it is really quite the academic school*—and didn’t call much.

“You don’t even look happy to see me.” She looks around my bedroom. “It’s a nice place here. Took me longer than I figured to find it.” She steadies her gaze back on me.

“Say, can you prescribe Valium?” She shakes one of the bells nervously, a test.

Conner was the boyfriend who got me sleeping differently. We slept together before we *were* together, after some Trinity alum Christmas party. He was a physical therapist. We

spent the night in a Marriott extended-stay. He took my arms from above my head, and tucked my hands beneath his own.

“Bad news there, beautiful,” he told me, stroking against the grain of the black hair on my diseased arms.

We ate continental breakfast the next morning, exchanged numbers—and names, too, ashamedly. In the year with him that followed, I learned about carpal tunnel, what it was, how I had done it to myself. And it got better with Conner, not only because he knew the massages and the pressure points from PT school, but also because I wanted to please him. I wanted him to know I was trying. I wasn’t going to be dependent on his touch. So my hands eased up on me. I bought the wrist realignment braces, but I only wore them in the mornings after Conner went to work and I studied for my classes. I slept new ways, just as comfortably.

Bridgey and Esther met him at the next year’s Thanksgiving. My parents had come to town and taken us out for dinner a time or two. They liked Conner with his close-cropped black hair and his dimples and his supplementary degrees. Esther asked the regular questions and Bridgey smiled politely. We looked good together, Conner and Molly, physical therapist and orthodontist. Our kids would never be teased.

“So, I’m moving to Singapore,” Bridgey suddenly said.

And it had all been going so well.

“That’s India?” Dad asked.

“No, it’s Singapore,” Bridgey said.

Mom passed the casserole dish to Conner. “You’d like more?” she said, and before he answered she spooned some onto his plate. Then: “This is sudden, Bridgey.”

“No,” she said. “I mean, last spring in Hong Kong I made a few connections, it’s a banking capital, they’ve been interested in my research on the gold standard.”

Conner took a bite of the casserole.

After a moment: “...Research on the gold standard?” Esther asked.

Bridgey searched the table for recognition. Face to empty face.

“My thesis? The interviews I’ve been doing in Southeast Asia?”

She left later that day, stayed with a boyfriend or two, I think. We spoke in brief snippets after that.

Conner, later, in his bed, after he pinned down my arms so as to save me: “Your sister, jeez. I mean, what was the deal with that?”

All I can think of is that she liked the color gold. She even painted her bedroom gold once. That was all the information I had. The only possible connection to her new venture, the gold standard. No one knew she’d been conducting investment interviews for almost a year. We only knew she was gone. She was a black sheep, I almost told Conner, but that wasn’t true. We all loved Bridgey somehow, but none of us in the exact same way.

“She springs ideas on us a lot,” I told him.

We broke up later, after a week of long hot fighting, where he accused me of being too perfect for him and I lashed the same thing back at him. It was uncomfortable, especially when he came by to get something he’d left at my place one time, and he caught me in my wrist-realignment braces. He rolled his eyes and left.

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“Pretty sure the portal closed or something,” Bridgey says, here, now, sitting where Toddy used to, propped against the headboard as if there is any real body for propping, her flickering feet underneath my blankets. “I’ve got to become an angel or something, right? Because that’s definitely an option and it hasn’t happened yet. I’m still just hanging out. And it’s not like I see other dead people or anything.... It’s just me, by myself, walking around.”

Bridgey has opened up about death and its textures. At first she explained the circumstances—it was dark, it was monsoon time, it felt like taking a bath when the small truck overtook her.

“I didn’t bleed much,” she adds. “He crushed half of me in one fell swoop. Heart was like, eh, let’s spare them the waterworks, shall we?” But hot monsoon water was temperate, never unpleasant to walk under if you had an umbrella; the rains were calm where she lived, never windswept or horizontal like sometimes you found further south. Biking, though, that was another story. It soaked you through. Raincoats were unbearable in the mugginess, they added some extra ten layers to your skin, peeled each one of them back and the wet festered there like mildew. She wore a waterproof sweatshirt over everything, she said, which was fine once she’d gotten out of the banking district, and it kept the Muslimah shopkeepers off her case, because sometimes they said things about upper arms, shoulders, when they showed and were white like milk.

“I didn’t bleed much,” she repeats.

For a moment, my drunk weariness spills over and I forget she’s a ghost. I’m tired. I need to sleep. I’m about to tell Bridgey that I need a good few hours, it’s been a hard week—

But fuck, Bridgey's dead. This isn't an elementary school night with boy talks and algebra assistance, both of us huddled on her bed.

"I need to brush my teeth," I say.

(Old sleepover tactic: minty freshness energizes you, gets you back in the truth or dare spirit. Couldn't it probably sober you up, too?)

Bridgey doesn't acknowledge me as I go. I open the medicine cabinet and grab the toothpaste, trying to avoid eye contact with the numerous prescription pill bottles of Toddy's and mine. Xanax and unfinished antibiotics and birth control and beta-blockers. No Valium to my knowledge, but if I rooted around there would probably be plenty of containers I didn't remember. Since Toddy, there have been several different kinds.

I go back to the bed, sit cross-legged and facing Bridgey. "Do you feel anything?" I ask.

She grumbles softly. "Every single scratch."

But I can't see any scratches. She looks as clean and white as ever.

"Who else have you seen?"

"I went and found Miguel. He didn't wake up—that was pretty heartbreaking. I said his name and rubbed his neck and everything. Then Tony, he was in Singapore. I guess you never heard about him. He didn't believe he was seeing me. He cooed and all, so romantic to have a ghost, you know? Then started pulling his hair out like he was totally crazy."

"Mom and Dad?"

"No."

"Esther?"

“I thought about it, yeah, but I picked you because you’re a doctor.”

“And?”

“I told you, I feel all of it. And it hurts.”

She doesn’t say anything else, just sits there and looks at me until eventually it’s horrifying, and my head has been spinning for far too long, and I mumble some kind of *sorry, Bridget*, but have to cover my head with the blanket.

I wake the next morning with no Bridget and a migraine and the lights still on. There are sandwich crumbs on the pillow. My prescription pad is on the bedside table. It’s ten o’clock, and my first appointment was at eight-thirty.

I already have a voicemail and series of texts from Lola: “Cancelled the early appointments,” “Moved your morning schedule to Helianos,” “Helianos can cover until three,” “Are you all right? Need an extra few days? Let me know, I’ll start rearranging.”

I climb out of my tall soft bed and pop a few ibuprofens before calling back. “Yes, I’ll take the day, but just one, I’m so sorry, I’m just not ready.”

Lola responds in that soft sympathetic way, so sweet it’s uncomfortable, and I strip down from my slacks and blouse into a sweatshirt, then plop back into bed.

Most orthodontists can’t prescribe anything, but when I started on at Dr. Helianos’s I was still dating the ever-ambitious Toddy Bryant, and he seemed to have a million reasons why I needed to pursue the extra certification. It would cost money, and time, but to have the world of painkillers at my beck and call could bring me a larger clientele, he offered. Think of all the high school kids who would come to you, Molly,

hoping they could score something valuable from their braces phase. Their parents would let them be enthusiastic about orthodontia, they wouldn't ask any questions. It didn't mean I ever had to prescribe anything, but *the means to*—that was the thing. It made sense enough to me. I got licensed. In the past two years I had prescribed seven times: at least twice to a thirty-five-year-old getting braces for the first time. I felt so sorry for her I almost kissed her teeth as I bent over her, praying each of them would shift just right.

But Bridgey, Christ, what was that about? I'm tempted to think it was the tequila and my first night alone since her death. But the prescription pad is out, a ballpoint pen is beside it, and I've never been a person who moves around much in sleep, except for the urgent motion of throwing my arms above my head.

If I could call anyone about this, it would be Toddy. Even if he didn't believe me, which he probably wouldn't, how good would it feel to hear his voice?

Esther answers the phone at the breakfast table, and I can hear our parents having a separate discussion beside her: *Can you even believe about Lillian's daughter—*

“Can you talk, Es? The craziest thing just happened.”

—the one dating the professor?—

“Sure. You ok?”

“I'm ok, yeah. Look, so, I had this dream or something.” How do I put it? “It was very...very Christmas Carol, if you know what I mean.”

“You saw yourself dead?” Esther asks.

I laugh. “No, no. I saw Bridgey. Dead. Yeah, I mean, I guess she was dead. It was so real though, you know?”

Nothing.

“I just.... Was it a ghost? Or a dream?” I ask her.

“What’s the difference? What did she want from you?”

I choose not to mention our dead sister’s possible dependency issues. “I don’t know. It’s all jumbled in my head. I feel awful.... I mean, I haven’t even gone into work.”

A long pause, she’s planning.

“You could have stayed another day then,” she says. “Doesn’t sound like you really had to go.”

“I had appointments yesterday, too,” I tell her. “Esther, it’s not like that, I mean, come on. I dreamed our dead sister was sitting up with me in the night. I’m a little shaky.”

There’s a long pause. “How did she look?” she asks.

“*How did she look?*” I repeat. It brings my blood to boiling, what a strange, cruel question. “She looked fucking dead, Esther.”

“And you’re telling me she came to see *you*?”

“Are you seriously doing this?” I ask.

“No, Molly, I’m just trying to clarify. You mean to tell me our dead sister—you hear me, right? *Our dead sister*—has something so drastically important to tell you, to teach you or show you, that she’s got to come back in the night and haunt *you*? And you’re going to call me and complain about it, say poor pitiful Molly-me, Esther can’t you make it any easier? Esther don’t you want to help me and hear all about it? How I’m suffering? My sister came back from the dead and had the nerve to keep me up in the night. Go back to fucking sleep then, Molly.”

She hangs up before I can counter with either a denial or a qualification, that I was too sad or too lonely in my big red-tile-roof house, that I missed Bridgey in a new way now that I had to deal with it alone. That's Esther for you. And now, no middle sister to calm the distance between us.

But she is a smart person who gives reasonable advice even when it's shrouded in cruelty. I finally turn the lights off and throw my arms over my face and sleep.

Charles Whit was the boyfriend I remember the best, probably because I never once saw him afterward. He was fresh out of law school while I was in my second year of dental, and he was from Old Money so we went on lots of the fancy kinds of dates. Wine tastings, helicopter rides. He was the most generous, and most adventurous, of any of them. He did entertainment law and practiced through an up-and-coming firm for musicians and filmmakers, mostly out of Austin. It was long distance usually, and it was great.

He didn't ever worry about anything. He spent money with genuine joy, not extravagance. So when he suggested one of our weekends together be spent white-water rafting the Colorado River, that his father's plane would get us there and back in time for the school week, I accepted, even though I had never been so scared of anything.

The night before I met him in Austin, I called Bridgey. I wasn't sure where she was or what she had been up to since finishing up a small research grant in Baja California, studying some kind of fish or coral. She answered with a small hiccup and asked me what I needed without any small talk. When I told her, about the stress and the

pressure I was feeling, about how unsure I was that I could ever be an asset in the outdoors, she cut me off and she laughed. Loudly.

“Molly,” she said. “This guy sounds awesome. This trip—or date, I guess—sounds awesome. But shit, honey, he does not sound like your type.”

I huffed: “What is *that* supposed to mean? He’s too *awesome* for me?”

She quieted and murmured an apology. Then: “He sounds just as great as you are, Molly, I mean that. But it’s always seemed to me you didn’t want someone so spontaneous. I know you guys always find that interesting, like you find—well, anyway, it’s just not what you really want, I think.”

The call ended awkwardly. I got sick while we were camping on the river. Whit broke up with me about six months later, after I said no to a hot air balloon, a dude ranch, and a dog race.

Maya leaps onto my leg. The sun has gone down significantly, my phone is dead on the table, and the prescription pad is gone. My arms are bent over my head.

“What the fuck,” I grumble, and Maya creeps up to my face to paw me.

I get up and feed her, then kneel next to my bed, hoping I’ve knocked aside my prescription pad and that I’ll find it on the tile, untouched. I don’t, of course.

From behind me—my head pressed against the bed, trying to shove away the image of my dead, aching sister with those absurd little bells in her hands—I hear my name softly. She’s back.

“You ok?” Bridgey asks, like she used to when we were kids and I made a B or forgot to take out the trash. She, who never made an A and never cared about earning allowance. I crouch on the tile and turn to her, glad to be sober this time. She looks tired, fully human, bare feet on the floor and everything, but she’s translucent. We always joked that she was see-through, with her white hair and whiter skin, all her veins popping through like strands of little blue Christmas lights. Those same veins spewed across a highway in Singapore. She knows I don’t like blood, that’s why I couldn’t be a *real* doctor, so it’s obvious she wanted to spare me when she said that she didn’t bleed much.

She has a bell around her neck on a string. Her eyes look glassy, surely from death, but then again—

“Are you high?” I ask.

Bridgey shuts her mouth into a prim straight line. Then she shrugs.

“Why do you need a prescription?” I ask. “I could get so much shit for this. Can’t you just walk through the pharmacy walls and be done with it?”

She looks hurt. As if reminding her of her death is offensive. She pulls the prescription pad out of her gauzy forearm, like her whole body has become something more useful, and drops it on the table. Then she squats beside me on the floor.

“Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings!” she says in a lispingsongsong. “It’s been a week and I’ve tried everything. Seriously, what else could I try? Sorry I’m onto painkillers now, but it’s been *a week*, Molly, and I’m dealing with a body that’s been one hundred percent crushed. Tony mentioned that dumb Christmas movie when I saw him, and now it’s all I can think about. Maybe it’s seriously how we turn from dead ghosts or rotten meat or whatever I am to angels. I’ve been grabbing bells from places all

over. And ringing them!” She flops her head forward. “I just left the prescription in the pile behind the counter, in case they had to count the pills or something, so it wouldn’t be off and make the headlines. Sorry for abusing your D.M.D.” Then she laughs. “But I do feel fucking great.”

An hour later, Bridget and I are in my attic. She took the stairs with me, even though I asked her to show me something ghostly, so I could see her pass through things, because I had to assume she could. Up here there are stacks and stacks of movers’ boxes marked SEASONAL in clean tight capital letters. Our parents have brought these to me in increments each time they visit my new and too-large house. Cornucopias and small, stuffed leprechaun dolls. A garland of glittery pink hearts. When we find the stack of Christmas boxes, an entire one is filled with nativity figures, two cows, five lambs, three shepherds, and five wise men—we must have lost one and ordered a new set. Esther is too far away to get these hand-me-downs; hers are limited to small pieces of furniture worth the drive. They never even offered Bridget any. She couldn’t stay in one place long enough.

If Esther were here now, she would take the items out of the boxes one by one, and tenderly she’d tell us who had made each papier-mâché ornament. She wouldn’t point out how there were at least twice as many made by me as by Bridget or her, and that would be her most generous contribution to the process. She would be factual about it, gentle but far from sentimental, and there would be an air of favoritism, like she knew who was best loved but also knew who was simply best in spite of it.

Bridgey finds the bells. There are at least thirty of them, packaged in plastic, the small metal jingle bells that we wore on our shoes as little girls. Then we find another box, and inside it a wreath made of more of them. Bridgey puts the wreath on her head like a crown, and I'm surprised when it doesn't pass through her, but rests on her like she's sturdy, still flesh.

I take the Valentine's Day garland and strip the little hearts from it one by one, each clattering to the floor and none breaking. "This?" I ask, and Bridgey nods, so I start tying the jingle bells to the string. As I'm stringing the fifth or sixth bell onto the garland, Bridgey stops watching and kneels.

"Can we hurry?" she asks.

I remember, mid-task, that this is not my enthusiastic and strange sister, Bridgey. This is a ghost, or a dream, or a very mean trick.

"This Valium's starting to wear off."

I nod and work faster, my wrists asking me to slow down, such a mess of jumbled nerve endings wondering if they, too, could get a Valium. Bridgey starts to look deader than before. Her eyes are not as foggy as they were, but now they have taken on a layer of something milky, the color of milk still darker than her skin.

I pick up the next bell, its ring tinny and gentle as it moves.

Toddy wanted me to marry him, though we were never actually engaged. He slept over almost every night, sharing the bedroom with the crown molding underneath the red tile roof. Marrying him fit the plan. He was an associate professor, tenure track, doing

neuropsychological research in the labs at Trinity. He helped me out with the costs of my additional orthodontic certificates (from new money), and when I got the job with Dr. Helianos he threw a party for half the city at the St. Anthony Hotel. Toddy was only two years older, handsome and charming but sometimes too shy, and never made any serious plans without consulting me. Even my sleeping habits were secure. My hands had almost completely stopped aching. We discussed marriage plans daily—at my party he even winked at me from across the table and mouthed the words “Reception site?”—but there was never the pressure of a ring.

Approaching our third year together, it seemed imminent that I, *Molly, our youngest, the orthodontist*, was destined to be the first to get married. We had a three-day weekend planned in New Orleans, a bed and breakfast booked and two nights of dinner reservations that had taken several months to get. This would be it, it seemed obvious.

Toddy was at my house a few nights before the trip, and while I showered he followed up with some lab evaluation that he’d forgotten to get done. I gave him my laptop like I always did. He knew every password and shortcut. That’s what real love is, he once said.

When I came into the living room, my hair in one towel and my body wrapped up in another, he sat there staring at me, his face wrinkled up like a question mark, his mouth taut and angry and unsure.

“Molly,” he said. His voice dripped dramatically. “I promise I would never have gone looking. But your inbox was already onscreen, and I couldn’t really help myself after I saw the subject line.”

I didn't have anything bad among my emails, that was for sure. I had never done anything illegal, never looked up porn, never paid an outrageous amount of money for anything that I ordered.

“So I hope you'll forgive that I read it. But seriously, you've got to explain.”

I walked over to the desk and bent to see.

Molly

Hope you're well. Haven't heard from you in a while, but I know how that goes. I heard about your new house and I think that's awesome. Tell me what else is new.

Me: I'm still in Singapore. But the bank hasn't really worked out. They use mainly paper currency here, and it's maybe the prettiest money I've ever had my hands on. Anyway, my boss turned out to be a creep and a half. Just like they all do. No real pay, and way too much one-on-one time.

Suffice it to say, bad situation here. I know I'm going to be leaving the bank and I've found a couple basic jobs that I might try for the time being. Chocolate shops and a fabric shop and a travel agency. But what I was hoping, actually, was that you might be able to wire me a small bit of money. By small, I honestly mean just enough for six more weeks in my apartment and the flight home. I'd be happy to stay with Esther, or even Miguel if I needed to, I wouldn't put that on you too. Just need to get out of here as soon as I can. My adventure draws to a close. Please be in touch whether the answer is yes or no. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Toddy was standing now. “This email is fucking three weeks old, Molly. And you haven’t even replied.”

You don’t understand, I almost said to him. I didn’t do anything wrong. You don’t understand how it is. You can’t know how jealous I have been.

“You have money,” he said. He didn’t sound urgent, he didn’t sound like some great philanthropist. He just sounded confused, like who was I and what was he doing here? “It sounds like she really needs it.”

“No,” I stuttered. “No, no, no, you don’t get it. She told my mom just after she sent this that she was so excited to work in the fabric shop. Some old Islamic lady basically adopted her, they’re getting along great, there’s nothing now to make her want to come back.”

“Not to people like you. Jesus,” he said.

It felt unfair that he could say these things to me when I didn’t even have any clothes on.

After he left, which he did, because he thought I was being unreasonable, Toddy didn’t call for two days, which I spent sideways in bed, and when he did he asked whether I’d sent the money yet. I told him what I had already told him: she didn’t need it anymore, things had changed.

“Has she told you that? Or just your mom and Esther?”

It doesn’t matter, I almost said to him. She won’t call me and I won’t call her. She would never resign to returning to us. It was a pathetic plan, one she would have abandoned once she got home on my dime.

He sighed because I didn't respond. Something about me not wanting to give her this money unsettled him deeply, made me seem wretched and off-kilter and a chore. I loved him. But I wasn't going to give anything to Bridgey. She had had it all.

Days passed. Our three-day weekend passed. Who would pin down my arms in the night? A few months later, we tried going on some dates again. We didn't mention Bridgey. I pleaded with every motion of my insides, take me back, Toddy, marry me. He didn't. He married someone else.

When I finish the garland, I drape it over Bridgey's shoulders. She's moving slowly now, her eyes almost completely shrouded in white. I wonder what would happen if I touched her.

"Now move," I say. "And the bells will do the rest."

She does. She lifts her arms up and down, the strange chorus of all those holiday sounds. It's getting late now, maybe ten o'clock. She takes another Valium out of her forearm and downs it. I ask her if I could have one, too.

Bridgey nods without asking any questions, without even widening her eyes. She drops the pill into my open hand like a blessing. I take it dry and wait for it to work.

"If I wanted to shut my eyes for a little while, would you ring the bells for me?" Bridgey asks.

I mean to say no, I'm tired, bells are the last thing I want to hear, but I go ahead and say yes anyway. I take the wreath from her head, careful not to tangle her hair or

accidentally touch it, and then tug on the garland from side to side. I jiggle the wreath on my lap.

“The horse,” she whispers. “His name was Speedy Gonzales.”

“What horse?” I ask.

“The horse I bought in Peru. He wore a string of bells, too—around his neck on the narrowest ledges, so people coming the other direction would know to hold off for a while.” She leans away from me. “Come to think of it, he’s got to be dead, too. I wonder if I’ll see him.”

I’ve thought about that horse so many times, it almost feels cruel that his name could be something so stupid. Bridgey crouches, looking smaller every moment. I stop ringing the bells.

She bends over like to kiss me, but doesn’t.

“I hope it’s not like life was,” she says.

But your life was so full, I’m about to remind her, we were all so jealous of you. My moment has come to forgive her for being so much better, for all of her grace. And then maybe ask her to forgive me back. But just as I’m about to, she closes her eyes and smiles bigger than she has since death.

“That was nice of your boyfriend, you know.”

I open my mouth, but for a while nothing comes out.

“What?” I croak. I want to blame my confusion on the Valium. I claw against the fatigue.

“That was nice of your boyfriend,” she repeats. “I tried to wire it back when I changed my mind, but he said I could keep it anyway. I forgot I hoped he was here so I could thank him.”

Your life was so full, I hear myself hoping I can say to her. Why take what was mine then, too. But the attic is empty aside from the boxes. She’s gone. There is not even the quiet rush of wings. Not even the tinkling of a bell.

We often used to sleep together, Bridgey and me, when we were young and nervous and clung to each like illness you couldn’t ever shake, before our sleeping habits or our sisters ever betrayed us. I spent my days trying to be like Esther, getting the good grades and snapping witty remarks at our friends, but I spent my nights pretending that I was Bridgey. She wanted to be more like Esther and me, she always said on those nights, but Esther could be mean and overbearing so she never told her those things. I’d always say something like you’re lying, you’re ridiculous, you’re just trying to make me feel better, because Bridgey was the one we wanted to marvel at. Worth marveling at. We did our best to appreciate her, but we never did anything to include her.

My jealousy had never been apparent. I could lock it up here with the discarded decorations, with all the bells, and tell Esther I had just been off my Xanax too long. It was all a dream, Es, I’d tell her. I’m sorry, I’d tell her. It was not my grief alone. She wouldn’t say thank you, but inside she might swell up gratefully and go to bed wondering, if Bridgey ever did come back for someone, which door she should keep unlocked.

Catfish Mystique

Fitz's other woman's name was Therese. She worked in a tamale shop and had gold hair. He thought she was discreet to a point of mystery. Fitz came home late to Cece, his wife, and their two cats and their porch light. Cece rarely noticed what time it was because she spent all day in the dark basement. She was down there learning to make wine. She often made lists of new hobbies to try, and sometimes she actually tried them.

The tamale shop was on Astrid Street, just down from Fitz's two-story catfish joint. Cece had been a hostess at the catfish joint before she became his wife. It was seat-yourself, so hostess meant she would make sure there was silverware on the tables, and that she would refill the ketchup and tartar sauce bottles, every once in a while that she might have to halve a lemon. But it meant she got to wear her own clothes, not the smocked collared shirt with the embroidered fishhook on the pocket. Fitz pretended he needed a hostess when she applied so she wouldn't have to dress like the rest of them. He also renamed the restaurant when she got there, from Fitz's to Catfish Mystique. It didn't change the clientele or the reputation around town, but Fitz told everyone it changed the aura, because aura was a synonym for mystique. Then came Cece, falling over the bar one night and then into Fitz's bed two streets over, and they got married at some point, after which she quit hostessing. It had been eleven years.

But now Cece was surely spending every evening on the porch alone, and for Fitz there was Therese, in her own version of a server's smocked collared shirt, nametag pinned above a breast.

Fitz waited outside Therese's defunct drive-through window today like every day. Maybe it wasn't hers, she probably didn't own the tamale shop. But her command of it, her command of him, that raw ownership of his heart and digestive tract, that was enough to make her seem in charge of something.

He tapped lightly, a knuckle against glass. She came to the window.

"Yes sir?"

"Well hello there."

"Yes sir, hello there."

"I'll have three tamales please."

"Yes sir, just a minute."

She turned to go to the kitchen. She was working alone. Fitz wanted to climb through the defunct drive-through window and bow before her in the kitchen, offer what he could, seek out what might glow inside her.

"Four fifty please," Therese said, interrupting the better version of her in Fitz's mind. She didn't look up. He handed her a ten, took his change and his tamales.

"Same time tomorrow?" he asked her. It could have been a joke.

"Yes sir," Therese said. "I'll be right here."

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It wasn't an affair because he hadn't found a way to make it one. Therese didn't yet seem comfortable with it, and Fitz had never touched her, but he knew it boiled unspoken between them. He didn't want to lose Cece until every kink was unkinked between him and Therese. Everybody knew everything around town. And he hadn't found a way yet to show Therese that this was what he wanted, that this was what they already had between them. She'd come into Catfish Mystique before, alone or with friends or once with the woman who must've been her mother, maybe a few years older than Fitz but that meant nothing.

Cece didn't cook dinner or anything; often Fitz just grabbed Styrofoam trays of catfish and hushpuppies and little plastic dishes of coleslaw and whole lemons, because they liked to put lemons in their beers on some nights in the warm sluggish weather and then sit on the porch and just be. Cece would show Fitz whatever she'd done that day. Often she'd learned how to crochet or make ceramic bowls or do complicated algebra problems, or had honed earlier skills to finesse. Sometimes she went to supper clubs or junior league, but she was a loner despite being pretty—after marrying her Fitz realized pretty people weren't always well liked—and it suited her fine.

He hung around, eating his tamales slow on the picnic table outside, then running errands in that part of town, calling it his dinner break, until six or seven when the tamale shop closed and Therese waited out front for a ride. He had once, somehow, assumed she would drive a truck, but apparently she didn't drive. Maybe he just liked the idea of laying her out in the bed of a truck, since he couldn't picture her in his and Cece's bed

and his imagination wasn't all that good anymore. He could unpack her like the contents of a toolbox.

But tonight someone else was there, standing with his back to the brick wall of the tamale shop. He looked cold, even in the nice weather, but maybe it was anxiousness that made him jitter like that. Fitz had wanted shoes like that when he was this guy's age—how old was he? It was too dark to see. He guessed high school. Maybe sometimes he saw him across the way on the football field by his and Cece's house. Maybe his grandparents brought him to Catfish Mystique every birthday. But what was the kid doing here. This was his moment. He got to watch her leave, it was his thing, nobody else's.

Fitz started walking over to the boy, what a scrawny thing, there was no way he played football. Just as he came close enough to make out the baseball cap, the chin-length curls beneath it, the boy kicked off from the wall and opened the door for Therese as she came out. They walked off in the direction of downtown, the opposite way from Catfish Mystique. Fitz couldn't follow. How would he explain that to anybody?

So he walked the few blocks to Catfish Mystique. The lights were on and everybody looked busy. There was laughter and country music inside. The hostess smiled and said "Hey, boss man!" and he remembered when he made a hostess his wife. Which was she first? Fitz couldn't remember.

"Hey Danielle," he said.

She winked at him. She was as old as he was, pretty enough, big-hipped. He'd always liked her, but suddenly he found her repulsive. Graying hair. Pock-marks on her cheeks. Worn hands, dunked in bleach-water for the dishes.

Fitz went to the kitchen, passing rows of regulars, shaking a hand here or there. He refilled a glass of tea, and Shonda, the server, thanked him. He thanked her back, loudly, for all her hard work. In his mind there should have been applause. He went to the office behind the kitchen, past the fryers. One of the busboys had on a paper crown, and Fitz asked if it was his birthday. The busboy didn't hear, or didn't respond.

In the office he started on payroll but didn't make it very far. He kept thinking about the blondness of that high school kid, the hormones that probably sparked off him. There was probably just giving it a shot. Maybe using the boy for a cover. What parents would want her dating a man their age. And he had Cece, pretty Cece, whose own hormones had glowed and sizzled when he found her.

The office phone rang. It was Cece after three glasses of wine, which Fitz knew before he answered.

"Bringing dinner home?" she asked.

"Fried or blackened?" he asked.

"Both," she said.

"Twenty minutes," he said.

"Wonderful," she said.

"You love me, C?" he asked.

"Wonderful," she said. "Just wonderful."

He loaded the Styrofoam, wished Danielle and the certain busboy and all the rest of them a great night, and walked home, away from the tamale shop.

It was a cool night, the chill rising from the river and making him gasp every once in awhile like the fish he sometimes felt he was. He walked up to Cece on the pretty porch. She smiled in a half-hearted way. He wasn't late.

"Hi, you there," she said. "Come sit," she said, dreamy and affectionate like a prom date, and he did.

They both drank beer and ignored the food and talked out an idea for the future: a seafood buffet. Cece would order the furniture, pick the location, make some kind of dry white wine that went with catfish, and Fitz would handle staff, recipes, and mechanics. Catfish Mystique could become Aqua Aura. Could become Seafood Sensation. Two stories tall, and with a basement. If Fitz's Catfish had become something else, and if that could become something else still, why couldn't Fitz become something else, maybe a boy without commitments and with chin-length blond curls, maybe a bottle of Therese's shampoo?

Cece went to bed soon after that. Fitz stayed on the porch. There was a bonfire across the street by the high school. When he bought the house and opened the restaurant there hadn't been a high school, just a view of the river. Now the high school was on the river. It would have been the perfect spot for Catfish Mystique. Maybe someday for the seafood smorgasbord. There were some fireflies far off and the porch felt magical. They weren't fireflies, they were stray embers. What's the difference to me? Fitz thought.

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In the morning, Cece asked Fitz to go to the hardware store. She needed a dolly for her ripest barrel of wine. He said of course, and said he'd bring home tamales for lunch. Cece said sure why not.

They didn't have any dollies the right size, so he headed toward Therese. But then. The same blonde boy was walking down the street. Saturday. Fitz decided his tamales could wait, and he walked the other way.

The blonde boy walked slowly—contemplatively, Fitz thought—and the further they went, Fitz ten yards behind, the more Fitz liked him. He thought he understood him. Those wide strides that still managed not to carry him very fast, Fitz figured these were influenced by the boy's father, the athletic aspirations he'd once encouraged. But he was too much of a perfectionist for sports. One missed play would haunt him for years. Fitz wanted to tell the boy that it would be okay.

The boy turned onto a block of matching little houses, white with dark shingles and most with yappy yard dogs. The one he walked into was indistinguishable from the rest. A nicer house, yeah, but no view of the river, no pretty porch like his and Cece's. Fitz finished the block then turned around. He could see the boy in the living room, through the window. He was eating gummy bears out of a bag and chewing with his mouth wide open.

Fitz was disappointed in him. He started back toward Therese, and when he reached her window all he wanted to do was ask when she would be his beyond this.

“Yes sir?”

“Six today, please.”

“Just a minute, sir.”

Her hands on the food, his food, as she folded the tamales into wax paper.

Her gold hair was in a bun on the top of her head, but not in a fancy way, just practical. He would reach his hand through the open window and press two fingers against her cheek. Then he'd tame the baby hairs that framed her face.

He paid her with exact change. She lifted golden eyes up to him, and her lips curved into a smile.

"Same time tomorrow?" he asked.

"Tomorrow's Sunday," she said.

"Might see you anyway," he said. She did not laugh or look up to catch his wink.

Fitz came home with the bundle of tamales and no hardware, and he decided he had to tell Cece. It was time. This apple-yellow afternoon. If she took it well they might make love one last time on the patchwork under the sunlight from the window, they might cheers early cold beers and laugh about times they had had. *Remember our dreams, Fitz?* Easier to remember if she was laughing. If she did not take it well he had already packed a bag.

She came out of the basement, a faraway grin on her face and her heart clearly full with something. "Sit down if you don't mind," he said.

Then he coughed it out without explicit details, there on the folding chairs on their porch, that there was someone else and he didn't know what to do about it, that it hadn't been consummated and he wanted to talk it out. *I have the option to stay.*

But all she did was narrow her eyes, and a crinkle of a smile twisted her mouth.

"Does she know she's your other woman, Fitz?" Cece asked.

"She's started to know."

She leaned over like she was going to hit him, and he flinched. But instead she set a heavy hand on his elbow. She looked like she could have laughed.

“I am content,” she said quietly. She shut her eyes. Still smiled.

Fitz spent Saturday locked in the office of Catfish Mystique. He made himself finish payroll, then drank a six-pack plus two. He slept with his head on the desk. Danielle and the rest of the waitstaff and the cookstaff and the all the cleaners ignored him. He spent Sunday pacing downtown, daring to turn back onto the row of white houses, ask the blond boy how much his blondness had to do with it. Fitz slept at home, on the couch, pressing his key into the lock only after he knew Cece was hard asleep.

On Monday, he bought two extra tamales on his dinner break. Therese was quiet and smiled. He unpeeled the cornhusks in the dark across the road from the tamale shop, under the cover of a pharmacy awning. Therese shut the defunct drive-through window with a slam, and Fitz imagined her undoing her apron in one swift tear. He heard the blonde boy before he saw him, heard those nice shoes catch against the gravel, heard Therese giggle and then gasp and then giggle just a little bit more. Fitz licked his fingers and sucked out the small crumbs from the cornhusk, spreading it across his face.

They walked the same way the blonde boy had walked before. Fitz dropped the cornhusks and followed from across the street, his head low, his steps slow and quiet. They turned onto the block with the dark-shingled white houses. No, Fitz thought, but he also thought, Of course.

They went inside. Fitz felt his heart like the fireflies, like the embers, wild and unrelenting and on fire, about to explode. The boy turned on the light in the living room and Fitz saw them perfectly. She threw her arms around him and they started to kiss. The way people kiss in high school. Like the ones on the bleachers Fitz and Cece could sometimes see faintly from their porch. He grabbed under her shirt. Therese stumbled backward onto the couch and they laughed again, and Fitz remembered the gummy bears in that boy's mouth. The boy reached behind him and there was a lightswitch. He flicked it. They were gone.

They left me all alone, Fitz thought.

And at first he was sad, so at a loss for any want besides to be part of it all, or even better to be part of Therese, integral. But then he was angry. They were insulting his intentions to his face. The blonde boy had it all, and he probably didn't even know it. Fitz boiled at the thought that he might not be appreciating the gold and the glow of Therese in her after-hours clothing.

Fitz did not know what he was doing. He was something else, pure intention, pounding a fist against the front door and realizing it was open. Walking into the living room and flipping on the light switch, staring over at them half-clothed, half-formed like babies in the warmth of the womb, both of their eyes wide, horrified, their insides still buzzing, thrilled. He was something else.

They didn't look scared of him coming into the house, they looked scared of getting in trouble. They fumbled for their shirts and sat up straight. Fitz averted his eyes from Therese's chest, because this wasn't his moment, it was wrong. Fitz's hands were

balled in fists and he thought about knocking the kid across his young white face. Then turning the lights back off and taking his place on the couch with Therese.

“What do you want?” the boy finally asked.

Fitz studied Therese. The flecks of light caught in her lip-gloss.

“You haven’t told him?” he asked her.

The blond boy turned red.

“Told me what?”

“Told him *nothing!*” Therese cried. She was lava-red and seemed to shake. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing here, but you need to leave. I don’t even *know* you.” Then she turned to face the blond boy. “Please don’t tell me you know this guy. Please don’t—”

“I’ve never seen him before,” he said. He pulled Therese into the crook of his arm. “What’s he doing here?”

Fitz felt embarrassed. Talking like he wasn’t even there...

“Go away or I’ll call the cops right now. I don’t even know you.”

“I *love* you, Therese.” The words came out so easily, oiled and ready on the tip of his tongue. He hadn’t planned this part. Or any of this, he reminded himself.

“I don’t even know you,” she said again.

“What if you had known beforehand?” he stifled the first big tears. “What if I’d said something before he did?”

I loved you first, Therese.

He couldn’t think of anything to do to show her that wouldn’t scare her further into that blonde kid’s shoulder.

I thought you knew, Therese, Fitz thought. What happened then happened quickly. It was the first time she didn't call him sir. The blonde boy was squeezing her arm.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said back.

"I can't," she said.

"I know," he said back.

She meant that, Fitz thought. I wish it didn't make her so sad.

He backed out of the room, shut the door, and turned the opposite way down the street so that neither of them might see him through the window.

Later, Fitz crawled in the bedroom darkness to Cece. He climbed into their bed and knew she was content and that she would let him stay. He reached for her ponytail with his hands.

But she said no. She said without having to say it, *we will never have the seafood smorgasbord*. He moaned loudly and tried to grab her legs, but she recoiled. And out loud she told him he could go sleep on high school sidelines, watch cheerleaders who worked part-time in tamale shops. He could stay, but he could very well leave her, and things would still be the same.

He went downstairs and fell asleep in his clothes on the porch. The car was out front when he woke up. He decided to try again.

“Cece!” he called. He went inside, upstairs, and the bed was made. He rubbed his eyes and tried the first floor. The cats sat on the couch and gave him side-eyes.

He opened the door to the basement. “Cece!” he called down. There wasn’t any answer, but he hurried down the stairs anyway. What if—

She was holding a clear plastic hose in her mouth, a siphon for the wine, and was crouched on the floor near a barrel big as herself. When he married her, he never imagined this moment. He had imagined the vows, the anniversary dinners, long walks on Sundays, but never this small slouching thing spitting wine on the basement floor. Fitz wondered what the blonde boy would get to see Therese do, and if it might possibly be as unflattering as this. He figured it might someday.

“Cece,” he said again, and she spat out more wine, then the siphon.

“It’s okay. I know exactly what I’ll do without you,” she said.

“I’m so sorry, Cece. It’s a mess in me. But what would you do alone?”

She looked at the floor and shrugged.

“This.”

Her contentment was entirely separate from him. He was not the exception to her rule.

Then Cece said she was glad he had changed the name of the restaurant for her, that that had been him at his best. Her aura was wet, or maybe it was the basement. Either way Fitz wanted to reach inside. Cece was already bent over to her barrels again. Fitz almost touched her, but couldn’t stand to think she might rather remain untouched. He almost offered to take her hand and lead her back up the staircase, grab some beers and scoot the couch onto the porch. Maybe he could teach her to fry catfish. Maybe they

could learn a new language from some of the busboys that spoke more than one. Or maybe she could forget this conversation, let life go back to the way that it was.

Cece sucked the wine through the siphon, something new this week, darker than usual but still somehow white. She was content because, because—Fitz couldn't figure what might make a person content.

Cece smiled privately.

“Wonderful,” she said.

Worried Now, Won't Be Worried Long

My mom started taking me on these tours, you see, during the winter of my freshman year of high school. But the thing was, we weren't going to museums. We weren't going to national parks. We weren't going to the homes of our families or her friends or anything, though sometimes those were the places we stayed. If we didn't have a motel room or some long-lost connection, we slept in the car. Usually we managed somebody's house at least, sometimes sharing the couch, but sometimes mom slept in the bedroom. When these forgotten people asked us what we were doing, driving around in the winter like this, my mom lied to them and said it was a passion of ours, to travel. She was almost always huffing on a gin and tonic at this point. She did not mention her psychic.

“A passion,” she would say, “that we hardly even noticed until...well...you know.” She cast her voice a little lower.

The friend or family would shake his or her head a little bit and frown. “So sorry about all that mess, Augusta. Insert-name-here told me just recently. If you ever need anything....”

And what we needed was a place to stay.

The mornings were cold and clear. My mom never disapproved of my outfits like sometimes she did at home. We left after cups of coffee with cream, always taking care to rinse them in the sink of that day's person. If we had to sleep in the car we'd swing by a McDonald's or Hardee's and “get ready” for our days, which meant a to-go cup of coffee

and five minutes each at the public bathroom mirror. We shared lipstick and a red plastic comb.

Then we hit the minor highways, the ones that went weeks and months without incident or consideration. We looked at maps. We talked sometimes about places we could go. But mostly there was a cassette tape that Audubon, mom's psychic, had made and we kept playing it. I looked out the window. She and I only talked for about an hour a day, and never about what had happened.

What had happened was my dad went to prison. Once, I came home from school and my mom had to tell me all the terrible things he'd been doing, selling guns to people who couldn't have them. It didn't seem like that big of a deal to either of us I guess, not at first, because when your dad works for a weapons manufacturer nothing seems like that big of a deal. My mom had been happy, and when she was happy I was too. But then my dad wasn't around making money, nobody was, and things got different.

I say different because they didn't get bad. My mom started seeing Audubon, which didn't surprise me because she did those kinds of things. Once she'd hired a medium to talk to her deceased father, who had nothing to say to her except he liked her hair better short. Once she got interested in her own version of voodoo, after a weekend in New Orleans with her college sorority sisters. She came home with absinthe and an ounce of weed and some sage that she burned in the house. But with dad gone the weirdness became less of a hobby and more of who she was.

We were both really depressed about dad. Probably it wasn't a clinical thing, but we watched each other start to leave make-up out on the counter. We watched dishes pile up in the sinks, first the one in the kitchen, then the one in the wet bar cupboard. We

watched each other lie in bed—if we ever dared to cross the hallway—suffering in separate quiet. We watched the television. We watched our house get a little bit uglier and our clothes get a little bit looser every day. We watched the clock. All the hours bled together because there was no dad coming home from work, and all the days bled together because there was no business trip return. Mom and I also bled together, our poor wet red hearts, until the day she packed up our car.

Then she popped in a poorly recorded cassette of Audubon, saying the same few things over and over, and that was the soundtrack of the trip. She didn't call it hypnosis.

There is goodness in even the worst things.

Audubon's voice came from the cassette as we rumbled past a diner, a dog track, lots of trees.

Mom and I had just left a restaurant near a liquor store. Our twin Cobb salads made us look even more alike. She turned the ignition and stuck out her tongue, as if starting the car were difficult.

"There's a statue somewhere around here that's famous," she said.

"I'd like to see that," I said.

We passed through that town and didn't mention it again.

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When I was born, my dad had been forty to mom's twenty-seven. She liked older men, and Audubon sounded sixty, and Indian, from the tape deck. In reality he was a

poorly groomed forty-six, and I knew that because he told me. Because I was a freshman, my mom worried about influencing me too much, was scared I'd bring home an upperclassman dope fiend or some junior college punk. She had these ideas, you see, like that "going to the movies" meant going down on some greasy-headed JV jock. The looks that I got at night, after the movies, were some combination of jealousy and stress and being tipsy.

"Olivia," she said once, after my dad was already gone. "We can be the same without having to be each other."

"Mom," I said. "I don't understand that."

The only road trip I'd taken before this tour was to the panhandle of Florida. It was a beach trip. My parents spent it trying to remember what hotel I'd been conceived in.

She had to have known where the extra money was coming from, right?

So we found ourselves in Georgia on some version of one of those highways. Mom told me it was Audubon's recommendation, these long mysterious roads that looked like opening credits. Mostly, there weren't things to see. There were houses with happy dogs in the backyards.

"Olivia," she said. "Is listening to this tape bothering you?"

I hadn't thought about it as something that could bother me at that point. I just kind of fell asleep to it in a way, staring out the thin chilly glass of my window and thinking about having my own happy dog or backyard. So then I tuned in to the words, his thick brown accent shaping my mother's name deliberately.

Augusta, Augusta, Augusta.

But after a while it sounded like

Olivia, Olivia, Olivia.

Yes?

O-leev-ya.

He had a singsong voice from Pondicherry. He and my mom became friends, but after a while he liked me more. This happened sometimes with her friends or my father's coworkers, this favoritism. My lipstick was the same as hers, but it looked better on me. My mom talked all the time. It was usually about what she was spending money on, which at some point was only her psychic. I really didn't talk much, but when I did it was usually well timed. My mother's appointments with him were every other day, so consistent that surely there was nothing left to reveal. So she started sending me instead.

The door said Archibald Audubon, L.P.C., and this made him more than a psychic. I didn't have an issue with my mom's cover-up. The first hour I spent with Audubon, I talked to him about high school seniors with tattoos, missing my dad, and college, and he talked about what I didn't know: that a high school senior would never get a tattoo for me, that my dad didn't want me to visit, and that I'd go to college nearby.

Nearby wasn't what I wanted to hear, but Audubon rubbed my shoulder.

"Nearness is relative," he said. "It could be this continent for all we know. In the scheme of things, in the real world—the cosmos, O-leev-ya—all the places we've ever heard of are nearnesses."

I kissed him hard. He rubbed under my shirt. I went home an hour later.

He made the tape to tame my mother. His voice on repeat told her not to spend so much money, not to worry so hard in the night, not to drink so much on weekdays, not to forget the home she and her husband had made. I tried not to listen because it felt too personal. Certain things between a mother and daughter are obvious, but that doesn't make it necessary or comfortable to talk about them. "Olivia, you have your issues and I have mine."

By the time this conversation took place, we were farther south in Georgia and it was evergreen. Winter was a state of mind here, not much of a season, and you couldn't tell it was cold unless you pressed a finger up against the car window.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Nothing in particular or anything," she said quickly. "But we all do. I just have to deal with some of mine right now."

"I don't know if I follow you."

"The tape, Olivia," she said to me. "The tape. It's a way for me to deal with mine."

"Who are we crashing with tonight?" I asked.

She looked hard at the highway asphalt. "Tonight's probably a me-and-you night."

I made the smallest sighing noise and she pulled the car off the road. She unbuckled and rebuckled her seatbelt, then leaned over until our faces nearly touched. "Look, I know it feels pretty great to bitch about things now that you're mature and got

your period and all. But this is life, Olivia, and we don't always get those amazing options, you know. What would you rather be doing, huh? Passing through a metal detector so you can go see your dad?"

"It's not that," I said. "I don't know. What are we doing here? Where are we trying to go?"

My mom took one of her cold hands and with it turned my chin so I had to look at her. She and I looked so terribly alike. Audubon chanted from the tape deck.

Augusta, Augusta, it is all right to be afraid.

Sometimes, I once told Audubon, my mother scared me a little. He said this was normal, that all freshman girls felt this way at least some of the time. It even made him laugh. Audubon liked the idea that I was a normal freshman girl, and I liked the idea that seeing a shrink or a psychic made me exceptional. There had to be someone jealous, who wanted to be me, besides my mother.

"But why specifically does she scare you?"

He knew her so well that it almost felt like she was my counselor. It was weird how maybe she had secrets with Audubon as big as mine.

"It's like she needs someone to tell her what to do. Just sometimes," I added and he smiled.

"Don't we all need that sometimes, O-leev-ya?"

He fingered the cuff of his shirt tentatively, as if trying to convince the sleeve to do something. Audubon, I thought, who is Audubon? He didn't look or act like my dad,

but there was something—in his age? I didn't know what—that had made me want to give him a hug once. That changed.

“Have you been hypnotizing me?” I asked.

“Olivia?” He pronounced the i's just right—short and unsure, then long and accusatory.

“It would make more sense if you were.”

He put his hand on my leg, like to say *You're an idiot and it's okay*, and then nodded toward the door to the lobby.

“I believe your mother is early.”

We got close to Alabama and my mom said we could stay with an old friend. I figured this meant an old boyfriend, and I was not in the mood for competition, so I didn't reach for the lipstick. I clambered out of the car with tangled hair and sallow cheekbones. My mom pinched color into her own face. I thought about her younger, maybe in the voodoo days of my furthest youth, and it was kind of a pleasant thought. I got excited about the idea of a future.

At the front door my mom bent to a flowerpot. She brought a key to the knob. “Mom—” I said, but she shook her head and pushed her way in.

“He is out of town. He works a lot in Nebraska.”

Nebraska, I thought, what kind of a place is Nebraska?

There were two nice bedrooms to choose from, and we chose to sleep in the small one, together. His house was well decorated. It smelled good. I liked the way his art hung

on the walls. There was a record player in the main room downstairs, and my mom started hunting through his crate of records even before hunting down the bar.

My mom asked me.

I did not say anything. I had been planning for the worst. I was ready to say he clapped his hands three times and all of a sudden I was awake, my hair matted into fistfuls. I pulled the red plastic comb through my hair.

None of it was my fault.

I got Audubon how my mom wanted everyone, I got him close, and I could not tell her because I thought she would burst. I thought she would leave me, here, wherever we were, and make her own trek toward somewhere like Nebraska, and my God how I knew it would hurt. I could not lose her to what had happened the way we lost dad to everything that had happened. Things were fine when we ignored them. I could not lose if I just stayed quiet. Nothing would change. No one would get upset. It would all stay quiet. I had done it, it was not my fault.

“God, that’s a relief. Sorry. I can’t believe it even crossed my mind.” She stared hard and was probably thinking about my dad’s quiet effective way of arguing. Her glass was empty and I wondered if I could refill it without conceding anything.

“Olivia,” she said. “You and I, we don’t give each other the silent treatment. That’s beneath us.”

I thought about hot rollers, how we could use a set on this trip, maybe some in a battery-powered little case. Or solar-powered. Or powered by the sound of a voice on

repeat, could that fuel anything besides my mother? Her jealousy was like an extra passenger.

“It’s beneath us,” she repeated, her voice slick from the drink.

I wondered what lay before us. I wondered what lay between.

Later I came out of his living room into the kitchen, where the Aretha Franklin was playing. My mom had a glass to her lips and was leaning against the stove with her butt. I heard her say my name into the drink, and I thought about our damp dying hearts and how maybe her pain was the worse one. She looked like a mom from a movie, hair pinned up for bed like she’d come downstairs to kiss me goodnight.

‘Cause you make me feel, you make me feel

You make me feel like a natural woman

I wasn’t buying it. We weren’t capable of feeling natural—maybe supernatural, or a little bit loaded. I thought about Audubon’s cassette. This was not our home. This was not our copper backsplash or our wallpaper, just the right shade of pearl. This was not our Aretha Franklin record. *How does that feel, Augusta?*

In the morning, mom would wake me up and press me against her heart. She would tell me it was time to go home. I would smile and thank her, glance longingly at the copper backsplash on our way out, and then I’d wonder, where is our home? She would probably feel the loudness of my wondering, and she might pull the car over, pop

out Audubon's cassette. Maybe she'd toss it out the window and hug me. Maybe we could say we missed dad, oh how we missed him, his crookedness and his wide kind eyes. We could cry tears that would fall in straight lines. Our make-up would not smear. I would tell her and she would forgive me. She would not insist that she already knew.

“Olivia,” my mom would say. “I really always enjoyed it when I made mistakes.”

“Maybe I'll try that,” I would offer, and our laughter might fill the car for a little while.

A Child Again

Sabrina called and told me I could move back in, but there would be sturdier ground rules. “OK,” I said. “I can do ground rules.” I bought a pashmina on my way back, hoping that it might keep me warm. It was the only four dollars I had.

I didn’t even try to move slowly. I had been lolling around Cobble Hill long enough. I started thinking how much I’d like a cigarette. I could look like I was doing something at least. Or find some cardboard and make a sign if I was out here long enough. I still knew how to curve the capital Cs just right. I wrapped the pashmina close around my neck, but it didn’t make me warmer, it just tickled. I half-ran.

I’d been keeping Sig up at night, that’s what she said earlier that morning when she made me go. I had to call the hospital and try to find a new placement now. And if I didn’t, what then.

To hell with our ills, she had said. (She used that word, *illlllls*.) She was frying ham on the stove for everyone. If I kept Sig up at night, I wasn’t doing anyone in the house any good, so I looked at her and told her I would stop. Promised.

Sabrina called it the Three-Quarters House, because we were *more than halfway*, and there wasn’t even anything wrong with some of us. I wasn’t a junkie or alcoholic or somebody’s victim, I was just looking for a place to go. Some people were junkies or alcoholics or victims, though, and we had to be respectful of that. Courts and hospitals recommended people for rehabilitation—it was voluntary, and it got you out of a

situation you probably didn't want to be in. But once you agreed to that voluntary-ness you signed a contract to stay a certain amount of time. Easy come, easy go, Sabrina said. And we sat on the stoop at night, all different colors and ages and alliances among us, and smoked cigarettes and drank Cokes and said nothing.

I came up to the stoop after a while of slump-faced buildings, my mouth buried deep in the whorls of the pashmina. My cheeks were surely red from cold. I went up and used my key. I guess Sabrina'd known she was going to take me back in, but I didn't realize it until I fingered the key and remembered she hadn't asked for it when I left.

Sabrina was waiting there and took my suitcase from me. She gave me one of those almost-hugs like I was her aunt, or a kindergarten enemy she was being forced to forgive. I pressed my forehead into her shoulder, even though she didn't want me to, and I huffed back a sob. She patted me and said, "Come on, come on, it's all right." My hair got caught in her long earring, some blue chains spun together with a porcelain bird at the bottom. It sang out every hour because of batteries. I tried to fix it but she just took out the earring. "Bring it to me later," she said.

I walked upstairs and passed Sig's room and the door was shut.

Elsie was on our top bunk reading a paperback from the common room, *Lonesome Dove*, and she sat straight up and stared at me like I was new.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

I slid my suitcase under the bed.

"At least she was just bluffing," she said.

I shrugged.

“You’ve just got to stop. Otherwise you’ll have to start all over and find some place new. This is a good place.” She put down the book and I wondered if the creases in its side could be counted.

I sat down on my own bed and she couldn’t see me. I thought maybe then she’d stop talking.

“They care a lot about what happens to Sig, you know.”

I wanted her to shut up so I could think about how warm it was in there and really enjoy it, being out of the cold and back on a bed, and when the clock smacked seven I was glad we both could get up and go to dinner. I unwound the pashmina and put it over my pillow like a christening.

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It was a year or two ago. Still staying at the Y. Time went slow those days.

I was giving advice. **ONE DOLLAR ADVICE**, that’s what my sign said, and sometimes people went for it, usually hoping it would be silly and I’d let them record videos of me talking, on their phones or the other small screens they all carried. At first when they approached, I shrank away from their crunched-up dollar bills, leaned further into the shadow of the fountain, embarrassed this was what had become of me. But once I started, I felt it. I mean, I really knew how much I was helping them. And once or twice somebody swiped a tear from his cheekbone, once or twice I saw somebody shoo his laughing companions away, because they believed me, you know? I understood.

It helped me pay for the little stuff, like peanut butter or six-packs of Dr. P.

Sig came up to me on a day like this, looking straight at my cardboard \$1 sign, wearing brown slacks and a sweater tucked in.

“Can you guess my age?” he asked.

He had little round tortoiseshell glasses on his nose and a smattering of marks on his cheeks, but I couldn't tell if they were freckles, moles, or birthmarks. Maybe even a patch of shallow scars, like puddles but the dirty kind. His hair was gray, and thick. It curled around his ears under a baseball cap. When you looked at Sig, you must have thought the same thing I thought then, which was Hello, have you come to take me home?

But I didn't say that.

“Would you like advice? I don't do guessing games,” I said.

“Yes, advise me about my age, please. I can't seem to remember.” He was teasing, I thought. He was just messing with a pitiful broke girl at the fountain. Then he handed me two dollars.

“I think I'm seventy-one. I was wondering if I looked older or younger to you.”

I pretended to study him. Then I did study him. There was hair poking out of his ears. He had on an embroidered belt, the expensive kind that a guy will wear with anything. He was tall and leaned forward like a palm tree, and I imagined him lying sideways on a beach. He was more suited to warmth; that was obvious. I wanted him to adopt me but also take me on a date. How can you ever tell the difference?

“Older,” I said. “I think you're seventy-two.”

He nodded. “Thank you very much. Don't fall backwards into the fountain.”

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Coming back to Sabrina's was OK, I knew, and Elsie was mostly nice and the others were pretty generous with their cigarettes and letting me change the TV channel. I didn't see Sig at dinner, and when I went to the common room everybody was nice to me, like they knew Sabrina could be tough on us, but hey, maybe it was all for good reasons. Sabrina had been so good to me, and to almost all of us as far I knew, and I wanted to hug everybody and say I'm sorry that I have been bad. They all understood, though. Everybody had their own problems living in that 75% house, and mine being Sig was forgivable. At least I wasn't finding a way to get high. Shareen who lived two rooms down had gotten a job, working in the photo department at a Walgreens in Cobble Hill, and she had also gotten a new supplier. Elsie and I discussed sometimes whether or not we should tell on her, and we decided not to, because we would wait just a little bit and see.

In the living room, Marvin and Martel were playing Chinese checkers, and most everybody else was watching TV—Game Show Network, which was our favorite, because it was all about luck for people who didn't really deserve it, and if they got lucky without deserving it, well then hey, what about us?

Sig came in later, from the little evening walk he took sometimes, probably tonight at the suggestion of Sabrina or Mikeface, our therapist, and he waved at me. He was holding a glass of water and everything looked just as it did the night before, when I felt shaky about the warnings but still hadn't been asked to leave. Nobody looked from him to me or made a sign that they knew about anything. But people were often tentative about looking at me.

I was always embarrassed that people knew I'd tried to kill myself. That was *years and years ago*, I wanted to tell them, but still. Seven years if I was counting correctly. I couldn't just bring it up, because nobody brought it up first. They'd think I was volatile if I just looked at them and said, "It was ages ago! I've grown up a lot!"—because what right did I have to know they were thinking about it? But they were. Of course they were. You couldn't tell by looking at me, I didn't think. But if you'd heard about it before, you might look at me and wonder *How?* and probably assume it was pills because none of the marks were visible.

Sabrina told people. She didn't do it to be mean. She just thought it was a way to get people to be nicer around me, maybe to explain the rare but specific flinching. I did it when I was seventeen, for Christ's sake! I thought I'd lived long enough. I was on a bad comedown, the sticky and twitching kind. There was dried blood on my pillow, but it didn't bother me like the sweat did, or like the way my gums ached. I felt the need even in the bottoms of my feet.

But I had an excuse for all that. I had lived too long at seventeen. I didn't want to do it anymore.

Years and years ago, but still. I couldn't keep a job because of how often I went to meetings, to appointments, sessions, what have you. Shareen had a job despite these things, but Shareen was also smoking crack again and just walking it off for a few hours in Prospect Park.

Sabrina took me in last year, on the first day after the women's shelter told me I had to get a job or get out, and then after I got the house referral from the hospital, and she kissed me on the forehead, said you are mine and mine and mine, and introduced me

to our others. Sig was one of the others, still bent and sun-darkened like a palm tree on the sand. He wore that same embroidered belt. It didn't make sense—how could such a gift be here waiting on me? What was his damage? Something timid like whiskey, I guessed. His skin had sagged near his elbows. His sleeves had been rolled up. I was so happy to see him, then, remembering how his hands had held those sweet flat dollars and given them to me so gladly, like a gift, and I decided this place would be wonderful, here with this woman Sabrina and the therapist I would meet, because he, *he*, was here waiting on me. I loved him on impact, I think. I had never felt the need to love a thing.

“And this is Sig,” Sabrina told me. “He’s our resident grandpa for now. But don’t worry, he’s no angel either.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. I was still confused about being in a halfway house when I’d been clean for more than half of a decade. The hospital had always helped me find housing, and get welfare or odd jobs or indulged me in the way I gave advice in Washington Square. It was what they could do for me, they said. I took it.

Sabrina laughed and flapped a hand like she was shooing me. I stood next to Sig while she announced about dinner time. There was no way he would remember me. How embarrassing it would be if he did.

Then I started sitting outside Sig’s bedroom. At night when I thought no one would notice. I sat there and rubbed my fingers against his doorframe, because I didn’t have anyone here that I felt a connection with, and maybe because I remembered him, Sig was destined to be that one. He winked at me on a morning over oatmeal, and I knew what should be done. That night he left his door cracked open, and I came in slowly, and he was awake with the light on, and reading. He had less hair than in the daytime, under

his baseball cap. He smiled and said, "Come in, Antonia," and it was the first time in a long time that I'd even heard my name, so I did. Sig had a room to himself, not a bunk bed. I wasn't sure why that was the case. There wasn't a chair either, though, and he gestured grandly to his single bed, one he must have crouched in to even begin to fit, and I sat there at the foot of it smiling at him.

"What are you in for?" he asked. "I have been hoping we would get to talk." I didn't say anything. I told you your age once, Sig.

"Well me," he said. "I commuted from a short stint at Edgecombe. That's a prison mixed with a rehab. Now I'm here. I don't do drugs, they let me be, I just have to spend six months here. I have an apartment up in Harlem, with nobody living in it, and I'm here in Brooklyn with you. It's a funny thing."

Must be Good Harlem, I thought.

"I sold a lot of drugs, I did a lot of drugs, and they got me for it. That's the story of my time here, I'd say," he added.

I took a deep suck of breath and wondered what kind of a man he was. He was smiling and relaxed, so that was good, but he was also very deliberate, almost practiced, in his kindness. In my experience, people were either good or bad, and people who did bad things could still be good so long as they weren't hurting anybody but their selves. Being honest had helped me, with Mikeface and Sabrina and all the people paid to help me that came before, so it might as well help me now, too. I would see what kind of man was listening.

“I used to do a lot of drugs, too. Well not a lot of drugs, just a lot of one drug, and then I tried to kill myself, and I was a minor then, and I’ve been a ward of the state or pretty close to it ever since. Sometimes I give advice to make money.”

It clearly didn’t ring any bells. But he smiled then and said he wanted to guess at my one drug I did a lot of. I almost said I want to guess your age. He got it right on his first try, and he twitched a little when I confirmed it, as if to say, yes, how nice that would be.

I slept at the foot of his bed after that. I told myself it was because I wanted to know what kind of a man he was, and though he seemed morally like a bad one but personally like a good one, I figured it was because I wanted to know if he was more of a boyfriend kind of man or a grandfather kind of man.

Sabrina came to all our rooms every night, and after she passed by my room and rapped a short note to say goodnight to me and Elsie, to tell us she loved us and was always a hallway away, I came to him. He smiled and shut his eyes and I rested my head against the upside of his foot. We didn’t sleep—we talked sometimes, usually about how things were better off without the illegal stuff, and better off here with Sabrina and Mikeface, who he called Michael. But often we only hummed at each other or laid soft touches on the other one’s skin. It tingled sometimes, but I never wanted more. Family, I told myself. Not love. When I got tired enough I went back to my room, and Elsie usually yawned really loudly like to say she knew just where I’d been.

When Sabrina found out, she warned me twice. She never warned Sig, and I know why because I asked him—he had a lot of money that had been made through legal

means waiting on him in what I imagined was a big brick building in Good Harlem, so his stay in her three-quarters house meant a lot more to everybody than mine.

I had to leave after the third warning. Sex or not—and there was no sex, just quiet tenderness and an attempt at understanding pressed against the arch of someone else’s foot, into that small groove where only tenderness can find itself, a place fresh and afraid and all for the taking—we weren’t allowed to sleep in the same room. Nobody was. But he was like my grandpa, if I’d ever had a grandpa. Or a dad, if I’d ever had a dad. Or one of those teachers in movies who makes you take life more seriously, the kind you would want to say poems to. To assure me that things were OK. That’s what I wanted to tell them about. About the warm trickle of light as it glides down through a veil to you, when you’re a child crouched under an ironing board. When I sat with Sig, he was the sheet over the ironing board and I was safe and I was warm in the image of a childhood that had never been. I grew up upright in the soft light with him and didn’t hunch when I sat criss-crossed.

So he is not my family, I thought. I am in love. This is what love makes you do.

After an hour or so of TV, and then cigarettes and Cokes like every night with Martel and Shareen and Nadine who was new but I liked her, I went upstairs and sat at our table-and-chairs with Elsie. She wasn’t reading *Lonesome Dove*, she was on to *Ramona*. They’d been donated in the same cardboard box and she brought the whole thing up to our room.

“I wish you’d quit smoking. It smells up the room. You could at least wash your hands after—or even spray your hair.”

I frowned at Elsie. She knew I couldn't use the bathroom on our hall, that I'd gotten that special written permission from Mikeface to use the other one, the one with a tall shower and no bathtub. She frowned back, and reached around to our shelf. She handed me hand sanitizer and click-clacked her teeth.

“Did Sig say anything when I was gone?” I asked her.

“Like what?”

“I don't know.”

“You think he wanted to take your place?” She frowned and thumbed the book cover. “Nah, he shut his mouth. If he got kicked out, he'd have to start back at Edgecombe. Much easier for you to take the fall, I guess Sabrina knows that. She's just mad you're keeping an old-ass man up at night. He's all grouchy in the mornings because.”

“I was just wondering if he said anything to you. Like asked when I would be back.”

“No.” Then her eyes opened wide with remembering. “But Mikeface came by and said you'd have to go see him first thing tomorrow in the morning.”

I wasn't surprised.

I considered going to bed, thankful that I was back here and had a bed, but I wasn't convinced. Elsie eventually set the book aside and grumbled up the short ladder to her bunk. Adults sleeping on bunk beds seemed weird. When I was sleeping in Sig's room, I'd almost offered her mine from then on, but now back in our room I was glad I hadn't. I turned off the lights and got in bed, too, and told myself I would stay there. I did one of the breathing exercises I'd learned in rehab, in a class between the essay-writing

workshop and group session. Calm, I thought. You can fall asleep here. I matched my breathing to Elsie's as she eventually slept. You can do this, I told myself. Just appreciate your warm bed for the time being. Don't think about him. You could have it so much worse than this.

And that, it didn't work. I tiptoed out of bed and shut the door behind me. The walk felt longer than it usually did. His door was shut but I nudged it open softly, and he was asleep but I went and sat with him anyway. He didn't wake up. I pressed my foot against his calf and leaned down and got comfortable as best I could. Thirty minutes, I'd allow myself, and then I'd go back to bed.

Sig woke up and frowned at me, maybe not startled but definitely unsure. "Oh, go back to bed, sweetheart. This isn't going to work anymore." But he didn't make me get up. He scooted over and allowed me to lie beside him, and he fell back asleep with his arm over me. I thought about what Sig's real bedroom looked like. What color the walls, what books on his shelves. I imagined myself growing up there with him, taking the elevator and asking the doorman about his kids every day. I imagined myself in silk pajamas in his bed, my legs shaved and lotioned while I waited. Then instead I imagined him packing me a lunch and whisking me out the door to catch the car that waited. But those thoughts morphed to the bad kind, and I pressed my foot harder against his calf to find the comfort.

I grew up in a town where people had houses. It was not like Brooklyn, how we all shared the stairs. I used to take the sheet off the bed and drape it over the ironing board, and underneath it I played, sitting criss-cross.

Sometimes there were things like spiders in my hair, and it was in the years before neighborhoods got loud about who was living in them, and nobody checked on us. My aunt was a housekeeper in lofts. She commuted to the Upper West Side and she stole one pill at a time from the medicine chests. She sorted them in little black bowls on the counter, the white ones separate from the blue ones, and the tall blue ones separate from the rest.

She didn't put me in school or take my temperature or put any food in the fridge. She didn't answer when I asked about my mom or dad. She didn't let me cry or speak or play in front of her. She kicked me if I was lying on the floor, knocked me off the couch, if I was in her way, and so I made myself a place like a bunker, under furniture, and the best days were the days she didn't know I was there at all.

But how are you supposed to talk about it? How are you supposed to be abused? There's a right way and a wrong way—you wouldn't want to seem competitive, like the torture porn of coughing up the fits of your childhood is harder for you than for others, and that what you had to endure was the very worst endurance of all. Why admit it in words like welts or whippings or try to spell out the taste of eating rotted food, because truly, what good does it do? The right way is to turn your eyes to the floor and maybe hunch up against the collar of your coat.

You're required to say, It could have been worse. I didn't have it as bad as somebody.

How can you prove how nonexistent you are? And if you can't. What then?

What then? Well, cocaine makes you grateful that you have teeth. It hurts in the good way, and you clap your teeth together like this is the only true way to appreciate

them, to say thank you teeth for all the good you have done me, thank you teeth, thank you teeth, I am so glad I have gotten to bite and chew and feel this now, too, thank you teeth, I appreciate it. It felt so good to appreciate something, to like some small controlled aspect of a life beyond control, a life you never liked or could be thankful for.

And then, when even that could not help you, you tried to kill yourself and it landed you with this.

I got out from under his arm after an hour, went back to my room. I didn't wake up Elsie, or if I did, she was sympathetic enough tonight not to make a big deal out of it. It was hard to fall asleep.

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So when I woke up I took my extra-early shower so as not to bother anybody who was assigned to that bathroom, then went to the kitchen and cooked some scrambled eggs. I made them with cheese and butter and a lot of pepper, just the way I had always made them when I was a kid and earned some money for better groceries and when I wasn't buying drugs. I cooked four, though, caught up in a memory of hunger that felt big and scary like you probably wouldn't believe if I told you. I wished Sig or Sabrina or the new girl was awake early. I could share. I scraped the leftovers into a plastic bag and hid them in the bottom of the trash. Didn't feel so good to be wasteful in a place where everybody was generous with me.

I walked to the little room down the half-set of stairs, and tapped it twice with one knuckle. Then I went in, because no one else had counseling that early. But there he was, waiting on me behind his table (not a desk), except he wasn't Mikeface.

“Antonia!” he said. “Sit down. Gosh, I heard you were an early riser, but this is sensational. I’m always up early, too.” He stuck out a hand. “I’m Dr. Duke. My first name is Danny if you prefer that.”

“Hello. Why are you here today instead?”

“Sit down, okay? Great. We’re just going to have a session like you usually do, if that’s all good with you. Just want to talk over your day yesterday, and why you had to have a day like that. Why we wouldn’t want you to have to go away.”

He did the pleasant things that people at the state hospital were always too tired to do, side-eyed smiling and complimenting you, so it was obvious they’d snatched him from private practice or something, and he asked about my history without asking about my history, by starting a narrative about me and letting me interject. It was always the calm kind of session, where somebody was learning about you. The calm before the storm of bullshit you cannot correct, the storm of facts they’ve taken from your mouth and been able to turn into something else that you did not mean. When you’re young they ask you about boys you have crushes on. They make you bring your yearbook and point out which ones. Then they point to the picture of you, where nobody photoshopped the hickeys, or were they bruises? Then they go in for the kill.

There’s been a history of abuse.

Yeah, there was a little.

There isn’t such thing as just a little. Any kind of abuse is a serious trauma.

You’re right.

So can you tell me how that’s affected you? How maybe it was connected to that day you tried to end your own life? How maybe it’s connected to—

I was on the wettest comedown of my whole life. It wasn't about the abuse.

It wasn't?

Aren't you interested in what I mean when I say wettest?

Sabrina told me. She says you often fixate on that part.

Fixate.

Maybe when you fixate on one thing, your brain is trying its hardest not to deal with another. Dr. Horton told me it takes repeating sometimes.

Horton?

Michael Horton.

Oh, ha! We call him Mikeface.

Huh, well, OK, I'm not trying to be redundant, but we've got to reinforce the facts here, you know? I'd like to hear your story from you. Let me tell you what I know.

They found you in someone's bathroom. You didn't know the owner of the house. He was spending the winter in Florida. A pipe burst. You tried to fix it with toilet paper. You were soaked and wearing a little girl's parka. It was nine degrees outside. There wasn't any heat in the house. You'd been living there.

Mikeface doesn't make me talk about this in morning sessions. We usually just talk about jobs and how I'm happy or not. And not even really, it wasn't like that.

What was it like?

Like scrambling eggs with nobody to serve them to.

So, you felt like you were living and doing for nothing. Unappreciated.

No, I felt alone!

You felt pressure.

From who? No, I don't think that's right.

You told Dr. Horton that you first tried cocaine when you were twelve. That's very intense. You were using for the better part of five years. But it's also strange you never moved on to other drugs. What can you tell me about that?

Nothing. I wasn't interested.

Others in the house where they found you were shooting heroin. Others were cooking up some version of meth—the records indicate it wasn't technically identifiable. Why weren't you interested in that?

I don't know. It was scary. I don't know. I didn't know them. I have a hard time making friends. I don't have to talk about this in the morning session usually.

Cocaine is an amphetamine. It—

I understand. It's not crazy like the other stuff. But the comedown is the hard part. That's when you do go crazy. That's when you sweat so much it feels like you're drowning and every thing you ever thought was happy turns sad.

But you almost drowned.

No, that's not right.

You did. There was a lot of fluid in your lungs. You were nearly brain-dead on admission at the hospital. You tried to drown yourself in a bathtub, Antonia.

But I regretted it later. I shouldn't still be in trouble for that. It was one thing in a whole life.

Tell me more about that logic.

There's not any logic! I just did it, it's over, I grew up, I wouldn't ever do it again.

What if you did cocaine again?

I haven't, though. I won't. One day at a time, but I won't. I got clean at the hospital.

And that was a three-year stay?

Yes. Rehab then state.

But what if you did it again?

Why would I do it again? What's that got to do with anything? It was the worst feeling I ever had.

Do I have to put it plainly? You can be open with me.

I am being open. But you already know everything, so it's not even that hard. It's not like telling somebody I met, somebody I'm trying to get close to. It's not like I have to tell you after our third date that hey, I live in a halfway house because nobody knows what to do with me because I lost my head over coke when I was seventeen. It's not like I have to risk our entire potential on this, because you already know it. It's just facts between us now, you and me and Mikeface, it's not something that would make you upset or hateful.

Hateful is a strong word.

Yeah, probably too strong. I'm sorry.

We know that you know about Mr. Elgin's past. And about his own particular problems. And to be honest—which you and I should be, you're right, we owe each other the facts—we see your disruption to his recovery as a gateway for you. A bad gateway. A gateway to hell if you will.

Hell is a strong word too!

But I know you see what I'm getting at, don't you?

And I did.

If I had been a cokehead, and if I was young and maybe beautiful in the strange flux of light through a canopy, and if Sig was just waiting to get back to Good Harlem and not deal anymore, but probably still get high, then maybe we were provoking each other. Our intimacy was against the rules of the house, and unnatural beyond that. Age, of course. And Sig had no plans to stay clean. If I followed him from this life to the other. What then, for both of us, what then?

If we met again, I'd be sweet to Dr. Duke and grin and maybe he wouldn't try to break me down about the facts of it. I'd call him Dannyman. Like Danny Boy, but some kind of a joke.

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After the session, I told Sabrina that I was going to look for a job, maybe try another photo center nearby because Shareen seemed to be doing so well. She smiled. She was still just wearing the one porcelain bird earring. The other was on the table in my room. I was about to tell her I was sorry that I'd forgotten to give it back, but she spoke first.

"It's all going to be uphill from here. You'll see. It might seem like things are different, but they aren't. Just the sturdier ground rules, like we said."

"Right," I said.

"You're still friends. We aren't trying to get you to make new friends or stop talking to each other. You just can't keep up a closeness that separates you from the rest of us. The house is the point here, the community is the point, and the closer you get to

one person, and breaking the rules with him, then the further you get from our community. And that's when it's time for you to go. That's when we can cancel a contract."

"I'm not ready to go."

"Baby steps," she said. "Good luck with the job."

But I didn't go look for a job. I took the train in to Manhattan and walked. Not far to the park with the fountain, and I sat on the bench, warmer than I had been the day before, maybe thanks to wearing the pashmina. How could I make Sabrina see?

Sabrina loved me, and Mikeface liked me, and others had loved and liked me, too—the matron of the women's shelter and the towel girls at the Y, the people who came back every so often for my advice, who trusted me, who hugged me or sometimes squeezed my hand for a moment which was better. I could not claim Sig because I had not been loved. He was not the first person to take care of me, if that's even what he was doing, or make me feel human after the time in my life when I did not. But he was the only person I had ever loved without explaining things, partly because he knew what it was like, and partly because he didn't need to know. Like your father shouldn't need to know the bad things you've been up to. Or like a new lover shouldn't know about the old. He was still a bent palm tree when I looked at him. A symbol of the beautiful places. Scant shade.

I stayed outside far too long. My hands felt hot with frost. I was lightheaded, and ducked under the turnstile to the train when I found one of those rare city moments where no one's watching. On the ride back, I thought what I could tell everybody. No photo developers needed, but I'd gotten to look at the film, and maybe I would borrow

somebody's camera and become a photographer. People would laugh and encourage me. They would be sincere.

I went up the stairs and to the kitchen crying, from cold and memories and not wanting to lie about the job search. Sig was there, and he gave me a big hug that said *Stop*. Nobody was around. Dinner smells were still floating. I huffed all the crying up into my sinuses and for a moment it felt familiar, almost nice.

"Someone was supposed to love you, weren't they?" Sig asked me. He pressed his face against the top of my head. "And nobody ever did."

Once there were baby spiders in my hair. That was the me I remembered.

"I want to start over again," I told him.

He nodded. "I know you do."

A shrug of lemon over tonic and ice. He stirred it with one of his long old fingers.

"These are better with vodka, believe me," he laughed.

"You're not a bad man, Sig," I said. I don't know why I said it. He smiled, and the corners of his mouth split into hundreds of tiny lines.

"I try not to be. I'm just an old one. And I've got to be doing as I please."

Right then, as if to tell me to leave him alone forever, a sign if there ever was one, his nose started bleeding on the left. I reached for it and he shook his head. He took a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and pressed. I thought about those long dark smears on my pillowcase that morning years and years ago. It was not like Sig's staunch, living red.

"Don't worry," he said.

"I'm not. Is it okay? Do you want me to call Sabrina?"

“Residual,” was all he said.

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Sabrina came outside with us later that night. It wasn't the typical After-Dinner Smoke. She rolled her own cigarettes—rarely, but her own. Mikeface had taken Sig to the clinic because his nose wouldn't quit with the blood. Sabrina wasn't joining the conversation.

“Antonia,” she finally interrupted. “We're going to have to send him away.”

Away?

“He's using again,” she said. Shareen looked down, put out her cigarette, and went inside. “We've been too laid-back about the drug tests. Because it's a three-quarter house, you know? We wanted you guys to be the best ones. I thought you probably were. You can tell somebody you run a halfway house if it's one full up of people you believe in. People you can root for. I guess not.”

“Wait—will he go back to prison?” How would I look walking through a metal detector, I wanted to know. What would become of us both.

She looked so sad, like good food gone rotten. She was sad I wasn't feeling sorry for her. She shrugged. “Another house if he pleads a good case.”

When I went to our room Elsie was in bed with a book, but she said she was sorry about whatever was going to happen, and that she'd left *Ramona* in my bed if I wanted to borrow it. I thanked her, put on pajamas, and tried to be asleep. But I couldn't. There wasn't anything wrong with me. Why was I here, besides the death I'd failed to do?

I got out of bed and found the cardboard box of donated books. I tore off one side and got a marker. Thought about the fountain. **TWO DOLLAR ADVICE**, I wrote.

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It was Sig's last night. Maybe mine too. He was going upstate to something his niece had offered to pay for. I went to his room because why would they stop me now? I was the one who didn't have to be here, but Sig was the one who was leaving. He had just ironed a fresh blue button-down shirt, and hung it on his towel rack for the drive up the next day. He sat down on his bed and smiled and shook his head at me, then beckoned. I sat in his arms for a good minute or two. He told me he was sorry, but that everything was going to be OK. He said it like we were separate entities. I guess he was right and we were.

“Hang on a minute,” I said to him. I went to my room and came back. Elsie was asleep.

I draped my pashmina over the ironing board.

“Sig,” I said, a little more than a breath into the room.

I didn't know if I wanted to make love to him, or line up dominoes against his skinny white legs. I could kiss him to find out, I thought, and then proceed from there. I would crawl in his lap and decide if it felt like a man or like a lifeboat.

He came over, slowly and still bent, in his button-up shirt and his boxers. He seemed lank with lack of intent. I took his hand, rubbed my thumb over the tunnels of his veins, and we crouched underneath the curtain.

Among other things, Sig told me what he knew:

You had the dropsies. You skittered. The world was like a snow globe in your hand. There were right things to do and say, wrong things to do and say. You were supposed to be quiet when you got home from school.

“How do you know me like that?” I asked him.

He tapped a finger against the side of his nose, like Santa Claus about to fly back up a chimney.

I leaned against him, and he put an arm across my chest. It felt like I was in a triage area, like I'd been scrambling around in a warzone half my life, and now I was here, unscathed and somehow safe in the Red Cross tent. Bombs whizzing past, then *silence*.

But then again, better than silence. He hummed with his jaw against my ear. It was like listening to music underwater. I might love you forever, Sig, I thought. You could be the only thing to keep me up at night.

A great longing rose in me, the color of fat, that thick yellow. We didn't speak. For that moment it was all shimmery. Like shrapnel and confetti at once. Light upon light that hits a fountain. For that moment it was every moment I had ever wanted: warm safe nothingness, a place to share with someone worth sharing with. And he was not a bad man. Not a good man either. But it could be so much worse, I chanted inside, in the way I had always chanted it. What was wrong with him was fixable but unfixed. I was, for a moment, too short to see what was in the bowls on the counters. I had ribbons in my hair, nothing else. I was asking Sig to play with me, to swaddle me, tender me to a point past tenderness, read me bedtime stories and kiss me on the head. I could have it so much worse, I chorused. He still hummed, a mosquito to the heart of me. I could have it so much worse. I could have it so much worse. I could have it so much worse. But for the first time, I could not think of something better.